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GENERAL STAFF OF THE ARMY
HISTORICAL OFFICE

MARIO MONTANARI

THE OPERATIONS IN NORTH AFRICA
VOL. IV - Enfidaville
(*November 1942 - May 1943*)

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PRESENTATION

With this volume, following the three previously published in "Sidi El Barrani", "Tobruk" and "El Alamein", the Historian's Office has completed, organically and in the light of new accessions gathered information the comparative reworking eight monographs, published "just after" the war, related to operations conducted by the Italian Army in North Africa from June 1940 to May 1943.

This valuable study of Gen. Montanari - also author of three previous books and to which the Historical Office expresses its deepest gratitude - is very clear, precise and accurate, and, although based on official documentation of the opposing belligerent, takes into account the relationships and the memories of the protagonists at various levels.

Like the previous ones, this work is not limited to technical and operational analysis of operations-in this case referred to the Tunisian Theater - but, according to a methodological criterion most current, widening the field of investigation to the politico-military aspects of both sides.

THE HEAD HISTORICAL OFFICE

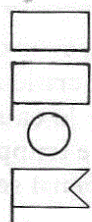
CONVENTIONAL SIGNS

used in sketches

Were employed unit markings currently in use by the Italian army, namely:

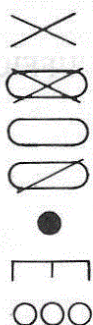
1. Basic Symbols

- Unit
- Command
- Logistical Institution
- Logistical Command



2. Arms Symbols

- Infantry
- Mechanized Infantry
- Armor
- Armored Cavalry
- Artillery
- Engineers
- Motorized Troops



3. Status Symbols

- | | | | |
|----------|-------|--------------------|-----|
| Army | XXXXX | Regiment | III |
| Corp | XXX | Battalion or Group | II |
| Division | XX | Company or Battery | I |
| Brigade | X | | |

To indicate a complex tactical using the symbol above the symbol of rank

4. Indication of the units

To the left of the base symbol has the numeric code corresponding to the symbol represented rank and unit code right where you placed the Department in question.

Es. 2  5 Indicates II Bn. of the 5th Inf. Rgt.

5. Indication of nationality

Where necessary, to the right of the symbol are used the abbreviations IT: Italy; Ge: Germany; UK: United Kingdom; AU: Australia; NZ: New Zealand; FR: France; Po: Poland.

Translators' notes:

*For want of a nail the shoe was lost.
For want of a shoe the horse was lost.
For want of a horse the rider was lost.
For want of a rider the message was lost.
For want of a message the battle was lost.
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.*

author unknown but centuries old, I like to think Benjamin Franklin in 1758 penned it, but research indicates he repeated an already known proverb.

I would like to take a moment to clarify this work. I do not claim authorship and this is a translation done with software designed for that task, while I did proof read through the work, something's remained unclear. The software chooses the most common usage for a word, while the author may have meant something else. This work is written for a college level reading skills, plus there are often cultural references or idem which I often miss. Also the text is full of spelling mistakes, likely due to poor proof reading of the original work or where the printer dropped or added a letter. As well as my difficulty with Italian word endings which in Italian indicate who's taking actions or a about who the action refers. I think I compensated well, but it was a learning experience, so I got better as the work progressed. Or I hope so. This project has taken as of this point fifteen years,

I have retained the Italian command titles, for example using Comando Supremo instead of Supreme Command. All the powers had their own supreme commands so it was easier to identify which supreme command is being referred to when its in that countries language, besides it meaning obvious. Below the Supreme Command there were various high commands or Comando Superior. These were the supreme regional command, and I used the Italian language version. Also please remember the Italian Armed Forces at this time are also "Royal" forces. So the "R" before the command symbolizes this. To be clear R. Esercito (Royal Army), R. Aeronautica (Royal Air Force), R. Marina (Royal Navy). So I used the Italian form so not to confuse them with their British counterparts.

I also retained the Italian forms of place names. Since I used the drawing from the books, I needed to retain the names used in the text for clarity. This applies mostly to town names, while countries, islands and famous locations used common English, hoping that same notoriety would impart clarity.

*Robert Denny
February 2016*

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Chapter One

FROM EL ALAMEIN TO EL AGHEILA

1. THE WITHDRAW TO POSITIONS OF SOLLUM-HALFAYA.

When Rommel, at 15:30 on November 4, 1942, decided to abandon the battlefield of El Alamein without waiting for the approval of the Comando Supremo and the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW), the situation of the German-Italian armored army (ACIT) appeared so unduly harsh, so as to make problematic the same opportunity to execute the order.

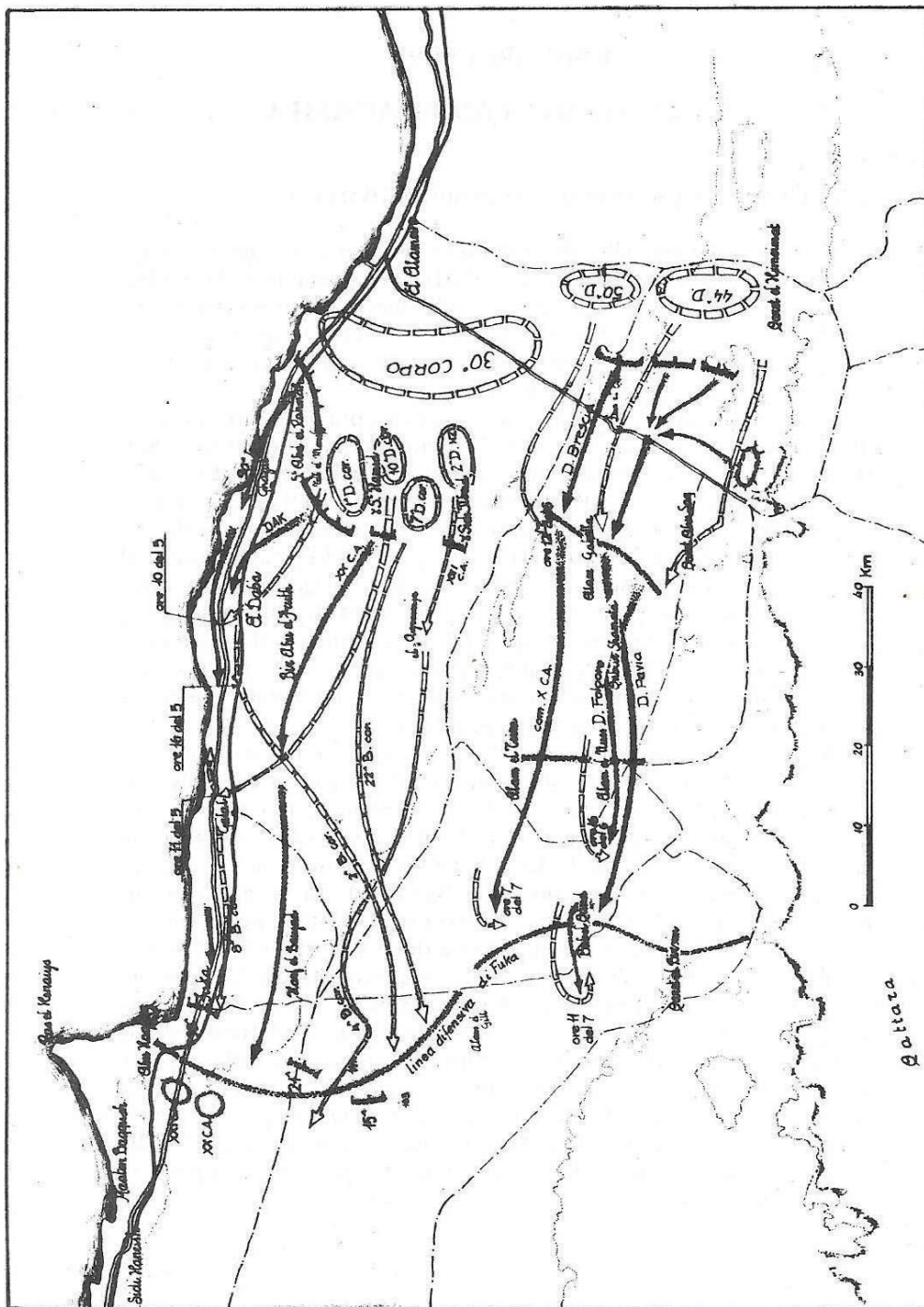
The large units of the army were more or less in the following conditions: the 90th Light Division still east of Sidi Abdel Rahman, facing south-east; *Deutsches Afrikakorps* (DAK) to the north and north-west of Tell el Mansfra, facing east; the Italian XX Corp west of Sidi Hamid retreating; the XXI Corps scattered in the area of Sidi Ibeid; the X Corps between Deir el Qattara and El Taqa facing east (sketch n. 1). The withdrawal was to take place along three directions of movement: the coastal roadway for the DAK and the 90th Light; a bundle of parallel tracks to said roadway, but further south than twenty kilometers, for the twentieth and twenty-first Corps; a second bundle of tracks, meeting between twenty and thirty kilometers from the northern edge of the Qattara Depression, the X Corp.

Of course, the indication of the unit was just comfortable. The northern and central sectors of the front were practically overwhelmed. The 90th Light kept a good efficiency, but the DAK (commanded temporarily by Col. Bayerlein, Chief of Staff), the XX Corp (Gen. De Stefanis) and of the German 164th Light Division remained only survivors. The XXI Corp (Gen. Navarini) was being annihilation: the *Trento* Inf. Div. had ceased to exist in the cornerstones hastily improvised to the right of the XX Corp and the *Bologna* Inf. Div. lay here and there in the desert, captured in full retreat countermanded by Rommel the previous day. The X Corp (Gen. Nebbia), however, was surprised by the total collapse with his three divisions, *Brescia*, *Folgore* and *Pavia*, in good order; Conversely, given the almost complete lack of trucks, he had to leave and destroy much of the heavy weapons and ammunition and was in bitter inability to escape the trap through the stretch of sand behind him. The same applies to the Airborne Brigade Ramcke ⁽¹⁾.

The withdrawal from El Alamein to Fuka

Schizzo n. 1

IL RIPIEGAMENTO DA EL ALAMEIN A FUKA



According to the notice issued by the ACIT, the device to be taken on the line Fuka included the 90th Light and the Ramcke Brigade a barrier on the coastal roadway; DAK the south of the road, on a front of about twenty kilometers, then the XX and XXI Corp, each of a length of fifteen kilometers, finally, between Alam el Gill and the Qattara Depression, the X Corp. The trend line from the sea to Alam el Gill followed the ridge of Fuka, then described a curve with the concave side facing the enemy. The area assigned to the X Corp was deemed impractical for large armored formations.

On the British side the discourse was a little more complex. Orders placed by Gen. Montgomery on the evening of the 3rd fit into the breakdown of the Italian-German front and the completion the success. The 30th Corp (Gen. Leese) was to eliminate the salient east of Sidi Abdel Rahman with the Australian 9th Inf. Div., while the 10th Corp (Gen. Lumsden) would have completely cleaned the coastal sector by focusing on the area of Tell el Ghazal Aqqaqir towards; 13th Corp (Gen. Horrocks) he was to follow closely the enemy in the southern sector. The 2nd New Zealand Inf. Div. was reserved a mission it was highly qualified for. Montgomery wanted to use it as a spearhead for deep penetration and the subsequent bottling of the bulk of the ACIT; therefore to Gen. Freyberg, remained with the 5th and 6th New Zealand Brigade, also entrusted was the 9th Arm. Bd. and the 4th Light Arm. Bd. With all these forces Freyberg was to open up between the sparse mesh of the side of the Axis and to reach the day of the 4th the area of Sidi Ibeid, oriented to run directly to Fuka preceding Rommel.

Basically, once we made the breakthrough, Montgomery hoped to cut off the rear of the ACIT, presumably formed by armored units, Ghazal, and to bottle the infantry, which supposedly moving along the shoreline, to Fuka. However, the Command of the 8th Army was completely escaped the disorientation caused by the intervention of Hitler with the order of *Victory or Death* and the British success seemed imminent, it is true, but still to gain. To achieve it, a huge effort was concentrated at the salient *Supercharge* obtained from the operation in the Tell el Aqqaqir, with the result of creating a terrible mess. On the morning of the 4th in that confined space they crossed and gathered, athwart the divisions of the 30th Corps, the brigades of the, the 7th and the 10th Armored Division and the 2nd New Zealand, followed by the respective columns of supplies. To big delays and the disadvantages of various kinds arising from such a state of affairs he was added the effectiveness of action.

At dusk, the 1st Arm. Div. was in the area of Tell el Mansfra, the 10th Arm. Div. to the west of Tell el Aqqaqir, 7th Arm. Div. to the north of Sidi Ibeid and the 2nd New Zealand between El Agramiya and Sidi Ibeid. Freyberg had wanted to start moving to Fuka around 21:00, but the division was still too dispersed and in those conditions it did not seem appropriate to deal with a night march through the unknown

desert. Therefore he established to gather in the night all the brigades and leave at dawn on the 5th.

Meanwhile Lumsden had modified the duties of his divisions. The 1st Arm. Div. (Gen. Briggs) had to push directly on El Daba; the 7th (Gen. Harding) follow the movement of the 1st, holding to his left; the 10th Arm. Div. (Gen. Gatehouse) direct aim on Galal; the 2nd New Zealander to proceed on track to Harf el Bayad and spend about fifteen kilometers south of Fuka, where the escarpment, softened to blend in with the surrounding land, did not present more obstacles, and then turn north. With these orders, between the hours of 05:00 and 06:30 of the 5th the four divisions in charge of tracking is set in motion. Meanwhile, since the previous afternoon, the three non divisional armored car regiments (*Royal Dragoons*, the 3rd South African and 4th/6th South African) were launched on the trail of the fox.

Tactical environment in which took place the disconnection from the ACIT not be expected a retreat based on organic criteria and regulated by the appropriate discipline of the movement. In fact, except for the X Corps of Nebbia, the retreat, started on a broad front and started in rough desert area was gradually channeling and thickening towards the coastal roadway, for which it offered the best conditions for traffic and the instinctive need of command to resume connections generally all broken. Inevitable and irremediable jams that occurred on the only arterial flow brightly lit by rockets of the enemy and fire, with the intermingling of personnel and material and harmful confusion, fueled by incessant raids of the *Royal Air Force*.

5 NOVEMBER.

In the early hours of 5 November Rommel he reached the airfield of Fuka and stopped there a few hours. Waiting for the flow of the units and in front of the sad spectacle of a hasty retrograde movement, under the hassle of air and ground pressure of the enemy, conversed with Gen. Mancinelli, Chief of the G.S. connection with the ACIT. It is not located the communication of the interview by these sent to the Comando Supremo and the delegation of the Comando Supremo in N.A. (Deleaze) - *"where, presumably, there is attributed - greater importance to the ranting of a man tired and demoralized,"* Mancinelli said wistfully - Therefore it is considered appropriate to keep the memory of that moment that kept the concern:

"I think I really knew Rommel, the man and the commander, in those hours spent with him walking around endlessly back and forth on the field of Fuka. We lived what might be called the moment of truth, when life no longer has weight and you look at things from a distance, beyond a distance of rank and nationality. I spoke the commander in anguish over the fate of his soldiers and worried about the future development of events and yet firm in his resolve to take up what was left of his army and continue

the fight to the extreme. He was especially worried about what he would say to Mussolini, for whom he had once sincere devotion, on the loss of the Italian divisions and appeared anxious to justify himself, I think, especially before his own conscience; he had done everything possible to save them, taking responsibility for transgress the delivery receipt to break the fighting before it was too late; He had called in vain for the allocation of a minimum of vehicles in order to address the operation of the withdrawal in stages, but had tied his hands with an absurd order, which no longer had any chance of being successful. All soldiers, Italians and Germans, had performed their duty heroically but were fatally overwhelmed, after weeks of fierce fighting, the overwhelming superiority of the adversary. More could not be done.

He showed extremely pessimistic about the outcome of the war: in Russia were now blurred the great dreams of conquest and Germany was reduced to the strategic defensive; the American presence was about to become a powerful reality, for the assault on the 'Fortress Europe'. In those days it was reported a convoy of exceptional size, collected in Gibraltar, and it was not known what would be its immediate goal: the final release of Malta or a landing in a big way, perhaps in major Italian islands, possibly in North Africa? The Italian navy was powerless to react to the lack of oil, the air arm did not have superiority necessary for an effective intervention.

In this very dark picture, Rommel judged definitively lost for the Axis, the game in the African arena and all attempts to further recovery. In his view every effort should have been now turned to a single goal: to save the men of the Army of Africa, magnificent fighters who perhaps there was not the same in Italy and Germany, in order to be able to have in the supreme moment of the assault on fortress Europe. For this purpose, according to Rommel, the imperative of the situation was to bring back the army to avoid further losses, to achieve a 'Dunkirk African', where appropriate abandoning all the material in order to save the fighters.

Account should be taken of this event, certainly sincere, intimate thought Rommel to understand exactly the true meaning of his attitude, of his opposition, the action command seemingly defeatist and discontinuous during the further development of the African campaign. Every thought, every gesture, every order you place from now on exactly on the level of implementation of its well-defined purpose: to rescue until to Tunisia all his men, for the realization of the 'African Dunkirk' " (2) .

Toward dawn the Command of the ACIT moved west of the airfield and in the morning he received the authorization to withdraw from the OKW and the Comando Supremo. Hitler was rather laconic: *"I put the Duce aware of my thinking. Given the circumstances (...) I agree to your proposal. The Duce gave orders to this effect by the Comando Supremo."* Mussolini left *"freedom of maneuver to bring step by step the army on the positions of Fuka, as you proposed, in order to ensure the retreat also of the non-motorized units"* (3). A little later, however, came a second communication from Rome:

"Events of yesterday (November 4) of which is received news only this morning induce the Duce to insist because in the backward step by step to make sure every effort withdraw of the infantry units. The Fuka position will certainly to stop and re-ordering. Lack of any tacking on that line imposes

to take measures necessary for possible continuation movement whose decision left entirely to the Army Command. Particularly useful in this case will be the stopping positions of Marsa Matruh also to give time at perfecting the basting line Sollum-Halfaya, on which the Comando Supremo makes flow the *Pistoia* Inf. Div. & all available means (...)" ⁽⁴⁾.

Rommel had only vague news about the marching columns. In fact the line of Fuka was now little more than a line of halting of the advancing troops: everything depended on the speed of pursuit of the British. His positions could be abandoned when the Italian-German infantry had reached there, or had to be abandoned as soon as he profiled a concrete enemy winding threat from the south. In this second occurrence "*He had attempted to save the savable - said Rommel -and I could not have more respect for the infantry, because otherwise everything would be destroyed and no soldier of the armored army would ever crossed the border at Sollum*" ⁽⁵⁾.

During the morning, British attempts to capture the torrent started along the coast were addressed on two points: between 10:00 and 11:00 at El Daba, the work of the 1st Arm. Div. (2nd Arm. Bd. with 91 tanks and the 7th Mot. Bd.) and from noon at Galal, by the 10th Arm. Div. (8th Arm. Bd. with 75 tanks and 133rd Mot. Bd.). The first stopped the bulk of advanced Italian logistics center of El Daba, absolutely taken aback by retreating because not notified, and various Italian and German units; the second made a prey far more consistent, because destroyed or captured a large column of tanks, artillery and truck carried infantry ⁽⁶⁾. It is not possible to identify units captured at the time, but for the Italian is likely to be very much a strong share of the *Littorio* Arm. Div., established since set at liberty from the control of the DAK and transport recovered from the divisional bases, and by some tanks of the *Ariete*.

However the flow westward had taken a good pace during the night and the arrival of units, services and isolated groups of the appointment on the Fuka ridge continued throughout the 5th. The bulk of the DAK, the German 90th and 164th Light had followed the coastal axis, with the stream of smaller units, grassroots organs of services and stragglers. The XX Corp disengaged hardly fighting on November 4, it was brought to Bir Abu el Fruth and then it continued holding of the south coast. The XXI Corp, that after the *Trento* had also lost much of the *Bologna*, intercepted, surrounded and captured in the desert by the armored cars of the British 10th Corp, who had also followed the inner tracks.

The state in which appeared the remnants of the divisions at Fuka, the absolute lack of news of the Ramcke Brigade, which was due to arrive in Abu Haggag, and the X Corp, led the Command of the ACIT to modify the proposed arrangements and to take an cozier array. The 90th Light still maintained for some time at Fuka, so as to facilitate the return of elements still arriving

and it could go back quickly on the ridge beam of the roadway. The DAK was preparing meanwhile to control desert trails that came up on the plateau of Fuka avoiding the escarpment, while the remains of the two Italian Corps gathered between the road and the DAK. The sinuous alignment for eighty kilometers down from the sea to the Qattara Depression, on which Rommel had hoped to take in hand the army, had been reduced to a down to only thirty kilometers leaning on a good natural obstacle but completely helpless on the right flank, where the land offered to the enemy many possibilities.

Moreover, the residual forces did not allow more. The XX Corps had two Bersaglieri companies and two guns of the *Ariete*, same as the *Littorio*, the I and II/66th Inf. and four guns of the *Trieste*, set up a company formation with the twelve-efficient tanks of the two armored divisions, and this was all. The XXI Corp featured a battalion of the *Lupi di Toscana* Inf. Div., already destined to become the I/61st Inf. of the *Trento*, as well as the I/39th Inf., a battalion formation of the 40th Inf. and 205th Artillery of the *Bologna* ⁽⁷⁾. The 15th *Panzer* had eight tanks, two hundred men, twelve field pieces and four anti-tank; The 21st *Panzer* could count on thirty tanks, four hundred men, twenty-five field pieces and sixteen anti-tank; the 164th Light was reduced to six hundred men. There was no longer even a 88 mm. gun.

As, therefore, speak of the army corps, divisions and even battalions appeared clearly out of reality, Rommel hoped to earn a day-perhaps counting on the caution shown by the Command of the 8th Army -and recover other dawdling units. Mancinelli informed the Comando Supremo significantly Rommel, he said, thought he could stop the line of Fuka at least until the next afternoon, but when he missed completely given the time, space and forces on which frame the maneuver undertaken in retreat ⁽⁸⁾. And shortly after, stating that the possibilities and intentions of Rommel were related to the situation of the ACIT in the day and the British attitude, he added that it was necessary to take into account the overwhelming enemy, to sympathize with the means further resistance ⁽⁹⁾.

Meanwhile, he had made the radio link with the Ramcke Brigade who seemed unable to withdraw with the bulk of its strength, but nothing was known of the X Corp. The first message arrived at 07:30 around noon for Deleuse, requesting very urgent supplies: the troops were without water and vehicles without fuel. In addition, the expected 150 trucks had not been seen. Unfortunately transmission errors or compilation did not allow to identify the location reached by the corps. A second message of Gen. Nebbia was received at 17:30. This was more precise: the 10 divisions were in the area of Qubûr Shamata, fifty kilometers south of El Daba and "*urgent sending water, fuel & food repeatedly*

requested as well by the Army in vain. Tonight I continue resupply & if not have coming fuel I will have to abandon tractors & trucks lacking petrol. Immediately inform the German army lacking direct connection ^{“(10)”}. Of course we were already being prepared by the delegation of Intendenza n. 3 a column supplies, but it was necessary for the appointment, set for 04:00 on 6 November, He present a guide from the concerned Command.

The X Corp was experiencing a slow death. It set on the way at the midnight of the 4th on two parallel routes, the same composition as columns inevitably led to serious imbalances and proved, if it were necessary, that troops on foot and truck-mounted troops can not go together. On the northern route (Deir el-Qattara - Car Pass-Teira el Alam -Alam el Gill) moved the *Brescia* in three installments: the first motorized (truck carried, parts of the swift artillery and the XXX Sappers Battalion), the second on foot (19th and 20th infantry) and the third truck carried (XXVIII/ 9th Bers., V/8th Bers., II/1st swift Art.) to act as rearguard. The motorized echelon reached easily and undisturbed *Car Pass*, on the first abutting line. For the walk instead the march proved exhausting and ended only at about 10:30 on 5 November. Shortly after the third echelon gathered in the area. The circumstances that the people understood that the situation turned for the worse. To the north-west and east of *Car Pass* British armored cars were visible. The *Brescia* was organized immediately to the best, but Gen. Brunetti had already made into account the difficulty of opposing a resistance with a minimum of effectiveness. In order, therefore, to save at least the motorized units, as early as 06:00 had asked by radio the Commander of the corps for permission to let them go immediately on their way, suppressing the scheduled stop. The X Corp could not answer due to inability of transmission, so after a long and futile wait, Brunetti also ordered the resumption of the movement at 11:30. Too late. He had just completed the queuing that the enemy attack was launched sudden and rapid. The few vehicles that could to escape were overtaken in a short time and also captured.

On route Southern (Bab el Ghent -Qubûr Shamata-Alam el Nuss) were launched the *Folgore* and *Pavia*. The queuing, fixed at km. 44 of the Red track did not take place regularly: interference between the movement of the units caused some confusion and slowed the retreat. The *Folgore*, collected at noon south of Alam Gaballa not suffered for the inconvenience, but *Pavia*, hampered and found too late, soon lost to the rear (II/27th Inf. and III/26th Art.) to columns of the English 13th Corp, readily thrown themselves on the footsteps of the Italian divisions. However, in the early afternoon also the bulk of *Pavia* was in the area of Alam Gaballa.

Regardless of thrusts of the enemy, usually rejected without excessive fatigue, Nebbia was facing a number of problems:

no news of either of the ACIT nor of the XXI Corp, difficulty connecting with the *Brescia*, bands stranded in poor physical condition, many heavy weapons units and ammunition (until then drag the weapons or carried on the shoulders) abandoned by the exhaustion of men, water supply exhausted, extreme fuel shortage. At 11:30 summoned to the two divisional commanders and after evaluating the situation, ended at 17:00 with the retreat to take heading directly to the line of Fuka, without waiting the required supplies. Consequently, at dusk the columns - shocked and battered by a new enemy threat - they set out westward. To the North proceeded the *Pavia* in two installments, the first motor and the other on foot; south the *Folgore*, all dismounted. Advancing side by side, in fits and starts, in a nocturnal movement slow and difficult because almost off the track and then a harbinger of direction errors and fragmentation. With the *Brescia*, of which nothing was known, he was sought by means of a connection of armored car patrols, but in vain.

In Rome it was living a heavy moment, not only in the search for a viable solution to deal with the disaster of El Alamein - in respect of which a statement of the Reuter Agency had provided additional elements not really encouraging ⁽¹¹⁾ - but also to the unknown the large convoy reported in preparation in Gibraltar and which no one knew the meaning: Malta resupply or make a landing in the Casa Bianca or Oran or even in Sicily? Speaking with Ambrosio, Chief of the G.S. Army, Cavallero illustrated their thoughts. To Secure Sollum-Halfaya ⁽¹²⁾, it was necessary to loot the *Brennero* Inf. Div., in Greece, of 60 guns from 47/32 and 20 mm, as well as in Italy find another eighty pieces 47 and a score of 65/17 and airlift all in Cyrenaica as soon as possible. To oppose a possible Allied landing, the R. Marina could not be counted because without oil, the landing of troops in Tunisia was excluded for lack of steamers and fuel oil; there remained therefore expedite the transport of the *Centauro* Arm. Div. to Tripolitania and the *Piave* Inf. Div. to Sicily, ready for any eventuality. At 11.30 he showed the Mar. Kesselring, the *Oberbefehlshaber Sud* (OBS). OKW had exposed the urgent need for guns 88, and aviation units of rapid deployment and well armed to rescue the ACIT, and was working to collect what he could. Then he reported the conversation with Rommel on the morning of the previous day on the battlefield ⁽¹³⁾. Not being aware of the latest development of events, he expressed the hope that he can hold at Fuka.

After talks with Cavallero, Kesselring returned to the German embassy and immediately telephoned Goering, who had sought in his absence. Such details as regards to the fighting:

"The *Ariete* has now fielded its reserves further (...). Further south, units of the motorized Corp (XX Corp) and divisions *Trento* and *Bologna* have resisted an attack by tanks as they could afford by those ridiculous defensive weapons that these units are equipped (...),

then he clarified the tactical prospects, at least as far as he knew:

"Now the key position is to Fuka. In general it is determined that a situation is in contrast with the orders given by the Führer (...). There is no news of the X Corp, the XXI Corp and of the Ramcke brigade (...)."

Goering wanted to know if the position of Fuka was well attended and Kesselring had to disappoint him. But he added that

"Has many advantages, so I think that if provided with the necessary forces (...) may provide, at least temporarily, a valid resistance. For our part we are preparing everything (...). The positions of Sollum and Halfaya are arranged according to the directives of the Duce. In conclusion, I hope that will reach me soon when I will have all the forces that are necessary to me.)⁽¹⁴⁾.

Unfortunately the retreat was taking a disastrous pace due to the overwhelming pressure of events and the British 8th Army.

Meanwhile, between the Comando Supremo, Delease and Superlibia they were multiple contacts for the appropriate action. Cavallero was concerned first of all the organization of positions Sollum-Halfaya (by Delease), with the units of the *Pistoia* Inf. Div. present in Marmarica and subsequent arrivals. Then basing positions of el-Agheila (by Superlibia), with the units of the *Spezia* Inf. Div. In this view he sent to Libya Gen. Gandin, of the Comando Supremo, to gather live information. The first of these contacts (afternoon of the 5th) were just a taste of the big picture. Gen. Barbasetti, head of Delease, judged very serious time and manifested the helpless pain of not being able to bear concrete help to the ACIT for lack of vehicles. Gen. Bernasconi, commander of the 5th Air Fleet, was also visibly worried: he had 24 fighters left (including 10 coming from Tripoli) to act in favor of the ACIT, another 16 (including a dozen low efficiency) for protection of the port of Tobruk and 9 at Benghazi. The *Fliegerführer Afrika* (Gen. Seidemann) had a total of just 36 efficient aircraft. The next day the two aerial commands to support the army, one of *Fliegerführer* and the Italian East Area Command, they would be moved from the field of Sidi Barrani to Gambut in Marmarica.

During that morning Montgomery had passed laboriously the chaotic traffic on the coastal road to go to the command of his 10th Corp. He spoke at length with Gen. Lumsden, known by R.A.F. the tail of a huge Axis convoy bound for Matruh was a few kilometers east of Fuka, reluctantly admitted the impossibility of catching them before it exceeds Fuka. Then he gave broader provisions. The 2nd New Zealand Inf. Div., passing the command of Lumsden, was to go around from the south slope of Fuka and then head to Sidi Haneish, while the 7th Arm. Div.

was entrusted with the job of the landing strips south of Sidi Haneish. The 1st Arm. Div. would cover the left of the New Zealand, heading west, then to Bir Khalda would bent to the north-west with objective Charing Cross, which is the junction to Siwa, south-west of Matruh. The 10th Arm. Div. Finally, had to press the front defenses of the ACIT in the field of Fuka and clean up the coastline from Galal to Fuka.

In the evening Lumsden received a personal message from Montgomery: to capture Matruh as quickly as possible to cover its extreme importance and the next target would be the alignment Derna- Tmimi-Mechili, on the eastern edge of the Cyrenaican *Jebel*.

As the movements of the different columns of the 8th Army would all suffer some delay, in mid-afternoon, the 2nd New Zealand appeared on the plateau of Fuka. Happily remains of the ACIT getting mixed up in a fake minefield laid months before by British units in retreat. However, the infiltration of elements of the 4th Light Arm. Bd. between the two *Panzerdivisionen*, which occurred around 15:00, Rommel convinced to abandon his plan to remain on site until the end of the 6th and 10:00 led to order the continuation of the withdrawal to Matruh. The X Corp was finally abandoned to itself.

6 NOVEMBER.

At the dawn of the 6th things they presented themselves in further deterioration. At 07:30 the ACIT sent a dispatch to Deleaze: "*Army heavy losses. There is fighting now in Matruh. Division of Giovani Fascisti immediately to fall back and defend positions from Sidi Omar on the border [sic: with Fort Capuzzo]*". We note immediately that the last sentence appears symptomatic. The *Giovani Fascisti*, on which we will return in due course, was stationed in Siwa at the orders of the ACIT: well on the German side was totally ignored during the crisis (sketch No. 2).

But, apart from that, we see the disposition of the remains of the ACIT. The 90th Light was withdrawing to the fortified camp of Matruh; the XX Corp was in the process of arraignment at *Charing Cross*, the 15th *Panzer* was just south; The 21st *Panzer*, dry fuel, remained south of Qasaba.

The XXI Corp, however, was still ... south of Fuka, isolated, with its two shriveled battalions and the two groups of artillery. Not notified by the 90th Light, to its left, abandoning the positions and not arrived the order of withdrawal (Commander of the ACIT later tried to justify himself by stating the impossibility of connection!), It constituted a new prey for the enemy. Attacked at 08:00 by formations of the 10th Arm. Div., It was overwhelmed and just barely managed to break away some units ⁽¹⁵⁾.

The X Corp, for its part, kept the painful search in the sand. Given the difficulty of orientation, the *Folgore*, crossed direction

Schizzo n. 2

A hand-drawn map of the Suez Canal region in Egypt. The map shows the Suez Canal running from the Mediterranean Sea (Golfo di Suez) in the north to the Red Sea (Golfo di Aden) in the south. Key locations marked include Suez, Ismailia, Port Said, and the Great Bitter Lake (Lago di Bitter Grande). The map also depicts the Suez Canal Authority (S.A.E.) and the Suez Canal Company (S.C.E.). A scale bar indicates distances up to 200 Km.

of travel of the *Pavia*, thus being to move to the north of it; at dawn an attack by British armored vehicles with greater violence and strikes swept the rearguard. Deleuse followed with trepidation the fate of the army corps, but everything seemed contrary. A convoy of supplies sent the day before to the south-east of Fuka had almost lost, then, found itself involved in a clash between British and German tanks, was forced to turn back, protected by a German formation, after suffering losses. Another convoy, issued by the Superintendency of delegation n. 3 Matruh on the morning of the 6th, was unable to leave since the turn of events on the line of Fuka. Even the supply by aircraft fell through for the same reason ⁽¹⁶⁾.

Early in the afternoon the ACIT was able to tell the X Corp orders to go directly to Matruh, a hundred kilometers farther from the place reached. Nebbia, still clueless about the progress of the fight, was devoid of news not only of the *Brescia*, but also of the *Folgore* and *Pavia*. The latter was the closest unit, but as he tried to link up there was no success, so that his commander, Gen. Scattaglia, considering now isolated, he decided to anticipate the withdrawal of Bir Khaldia and ordered the departure for 16:00 hours. A quarter of an hour before he arrived, however, an officer of the command corps and Scattaglia followed him to receive provisions. Nebbia said to want to stop in the area for a couple of days in order to wait for airdrop supplies that Rommel would definitely organized. Scattaglia, more skeptical and more ready to perceive the uncertainty of the moment, he tried to convince him not to stop, but Nebbia flatly refused. Later, however, came the news of the end of the *Folgore* a few kilometers from Bab el Qaub. Enveloped by armored cars and enemies Bren carriers, now without ammunition, exhausted, the remains of the beautiful division were forced to surrender: 200 officers and about 3,000 soldiers. Knowing this, Nebbia changed his mind and determined to start at 6 am the following day.

Even the 21st *Panzer* had a sad fate. Arrived at 10:00 the leading elements of the 22nd Arm. Bd., Defended long, even with the assistance of the 580th Recon. Bn., which withdrew from Fuka swooped behind the enemy causing him losses. Nevertheless, the situation of the division was desperate because the required the fuel did not arrive. After a nerve-wracking waiting, during which the 21st *Panzer* suffered other attacks, its commander, Gen. von Randow, was forced to leave the field with a few efficient tanks and destroy all those immobilized.

Despite the various hardships, in the afternoon the ACIT was deployed with the 90th Light from Gerawla to *Charing Cross*, the Menton KG (ie the 288th *Panzergranadiere Afrika* Regiment.) on track to Siwa, the 580th Recon. Bn. protecting the southern flank. The XXI Corp was collected in the fortified camp and DAK with XX Corp on the rear of

device, centrally located (sketch No. 3).

That day in Gen. Gandin went flying to the front. After much searching by cars, at 15:30 met Rommel west of Matruh. The Field Marshal looked serene "*while bringing visible traces of inside anxiety.*" Summed up the events of the battle and the fate of the Italian divisions: the *Ariete*, the *Littorio* and *Trieste* destroyed, the infantry unit probably lost because no means of transport. Altogether his remaining forces corresponding approximately to a mechanized division. He gestured bitterly order of Hitler die in place, arrived when the situation was already precarious and he attributed the inspiration to Kesselring. He was visibly tired:

"I give him the news that I - went Gandin in his report - which have already occurred and imminent arrivals from Italy and Greece, for reinforcements and supplies, are accepted by him with indifference and skepticism; written communications of the Comando Supremo and Deleage, that I offer him, he is regarded as outdated."

About the prospects in the short term, Rommel outlined deployment guidance to be taken to the border: the *Pistoia* between the sea and Fort Capuzzo, the *Giovani Fascisti* between this and Sidi Omar, a recon group south and the armored division for the reserve formation.

"Asked - Gandin Continued - if he could specify how long he could hold out on the Libyan-Egyptian border would reply that it was not in a position to be able to say. In this regard, he expressed his thought that the game was lost in Africa and that it was better to save the men to prevent them from falling into enemy hands, transporting them by sea and by air to Crete: so they could continue the struggle in Europe escaping captivity "

Gandin assured that Rommel he would faithfully reported what was communicated and Field Marshal concluded: "*I hope that the Duce is not based [irritated] with me*"⁽¹⁷⁾.

The summary of that interview that Rommel did not taste quite different and the *soft* tone, that his statements in the report are of Gandin, it becomes *hard*:

"I informed him exactly - Rommel later wrote -on course of the battle, with particular emphasis on the consequences of the crisis of supply and orders of the Führer and the Duce [the mention of Mussolini is not reported by Gandin]. I told him without further ado that the current balance of forces did not allow the possibility to resist in any place, and that the British could arrive in Tripoli, had they wanted to.

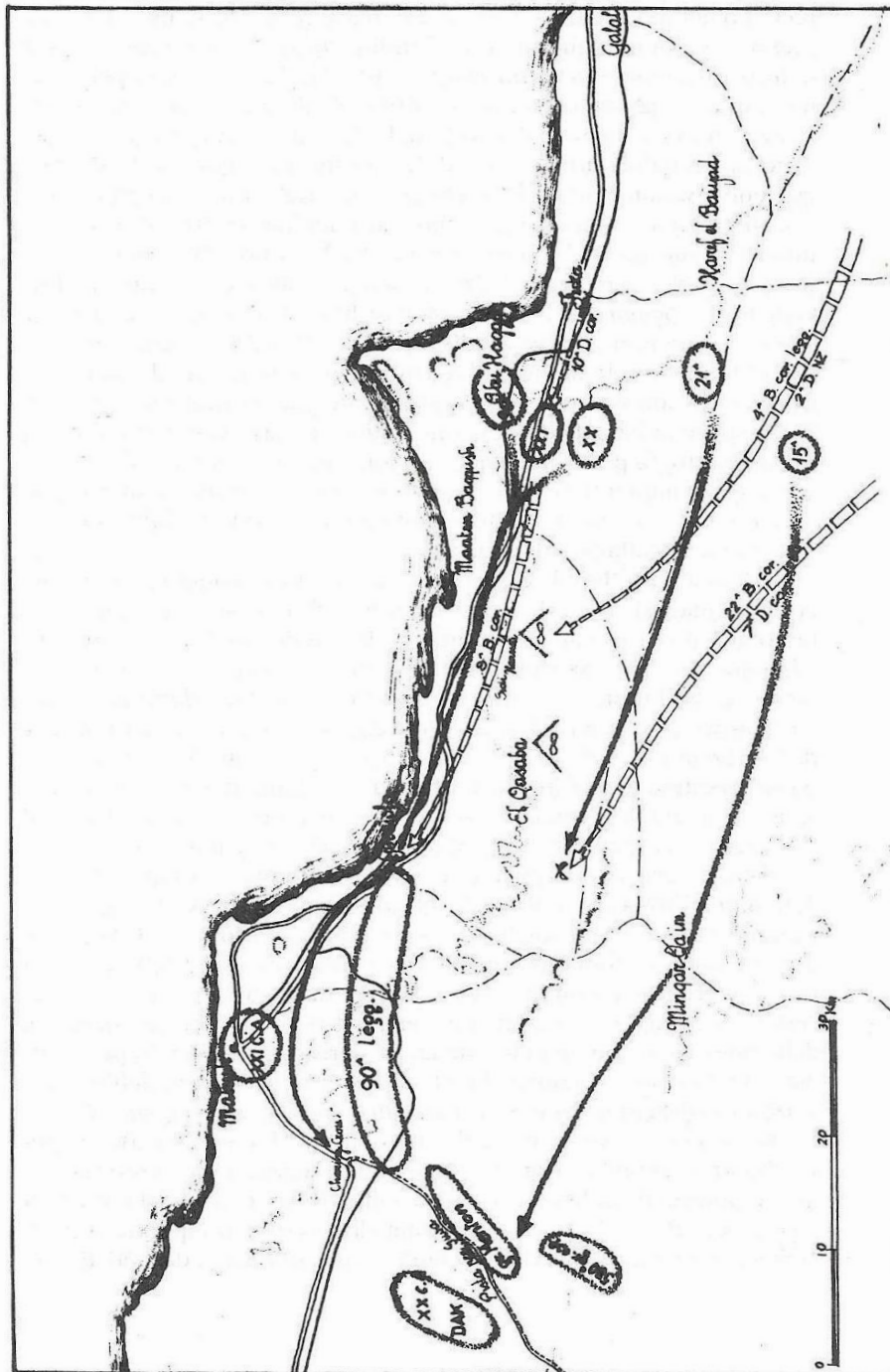
We were not able to accept battle; instead we had to try to hold back the British so as to allow our columns in which reigned a chaotic mess, overcome the Libyan border.

There was no possibility to rearrange forces until they had retired into Libya, because all the time in which they had found on this side of the border they would run the risk of being cut off. The speed, then, was a key issue.

We could not attempt any operation with our remaining armored units and motorized due to lack of petrol; all the fuel that has arrived here

Schizzo n. 3

IL RIPIEGAMENTO DA FUKA A MATRUH



was to be used to take away the troops. Gandin left my Command visibly depressed".⁽¹⁸⁾

Undoubtedly at this interview something it was not expressed or understood in the right sense, so much so that it seemed Barbasetti expressed some concern noted in Gandin "*some optimism that I could absolutely share*"⁽¹⁹⁾. He had come to assume a critical position against Rommel. He was getting first-hand news about the fate of the XXI and the X Corp and appeared unacceptable the lack of timely information, the use of Italian divisions regardless of their poverty of means and weapons, the disdain shown towards them and, above all, the unnecessary abandonment in the desert of the X Corp without any active task for the benefit of the general economy and the maneuver. Expecting the worst, he entered the order of ideas to start westward what did not appear necessary to the ACIT, in Tripoli to evacuate the families of settlers of Cyrenaica to prevent that they are left at the mercy of the Arabs, as happened in 1941; to return to Italy the political delegation responsible for taking office in Egypt; to prepare traffic interruptions and destruction of bridges, railways, installations of various kinds. And, of course, he had addressed every care in improving the defensive possibilities of the positions Sollum-Halfaya-Sidi Omar.

In Rome, Cavallero well realized the moment severely critical. When, at about 09:30, Mussolini called him to know the news, did not hesitate to point out that in those conditions hardly stop at Matruh would be more than twenty-four hours, declaring doubt that "*given the situation and the mood, [Rommel] can do a prolonged resistance at Sollum-Halfaya, also because he had many losses.*" Right, so, to intensify all efforts to the defense of Cyrenaica, but if this attempt had not shown chances of success seemed inevitable orientate organize somehow the positions of el-Agheila.

The crucial point, quite obvious, moreover, was the inability to counter the turning from the south. And this not only in Matruh, but also at the border and in Marmarica. This view appeared shared, albeit reluctantly, by the OKW, as reported in the evening Gen. von Rintelen to Mussolini, however, remained the need to earn as much as possible in favor, of course, of the preparations for el-Agheila. The result was a message to Rommel with the communication that "*Duce believes that army has to stop her falling back on line Sollum-Halfaya-Sidi Omar*"⁽²⁰⁾.

Rommel had not, after all, preconceptions of conduct. He knew well that a retreating maneuver must be adjusted with appropriate stops and just the border facilitated and at the same time imposed a stage. To get on the high plateau of Sollum needed to overcome the defilade of Sollum or up Halfaya two narrow places, in front of which

huge columns, tens of kilometers long, were waiting for a real blow. To bring them across the border under the predictably enraged *Desert Air Force*, it would take less than three days, according to the evaluation operations office of the ACIT. Given the certainty that they can not count on the granting of such a period of time from Montgomery to do it was to accelerate in any way, by day and night without interruption, the movement, regardless of the losses for the bombing and strafing planes. More than a calculation there hope to withstand Sollum-Halfaya enough to recover almost everything and rearrange the best units. This was the big difference compared to the conception of Cavallero, who wanted to extend the defense on the border for the benefit of the development of the position of el-Agheila.

The eviction of Matruh took place in circumstances that might call euphemistically unhappy. The Germans who fought often ignore the coastal side is a fact, but we must also admit the existence of an organization dysfunctional. As the established a commander of the sector (Gen. Paoletti), his powers would seem better suited to the needs of a control way station than to those to defend a fort. In entrenched fields were: poor infantry company and a couple of heavy batteries in coastal defense, dependent field Command; the big logistics base of the delegation of Intendenza n. 3, dependent of the Intendenza N.A.; ships of the R. Marina, Navy Command employees from Libya; units of the 3rd railway grouping, employees of the Intendenza; a water company, dependent on the delegation of Intendenza; the 288th *Panzergranadiere Afrika* or Menton KG, dependent of the ACIT; elements of Flak, dependent of the *Fliegerführer*, elements of the German Navy *Kriegsmarine* dependent control. The defense of the fortified field and the coast of Sidi Barrani in Ras Kenays were entrusted to Col. Menton, commander of the German 288th Inf..

The 3rd arrived a few divisional bases of the Corps deployed at El Alamein. The 4th the Head of Delegation of the Superintendency signaled to the field Commander the probability that those bases were postponed going forward. On the morning of the 5th came news of the retreat and with it began a retrograde flow that although essentially ordered, quickly assumed very considerable proportions. At 14:30 the same day the Col. Menton did call Gen. Paoletti had been ordered to move immediately on track to Siwa and that, therefore, within two hours all his men would abandon Matruh; he also added that he had handed over defense plans ... the Italian Navy Command. Later the Superintendency delegation announced the evacuation of most of the services and stores. On the other hand, the commander of the detachment of the 3rd railway workers protested that the Germans were carrying away heavy locomotives, ensure that the train already loaded with heavy equipment and inventory of the base could not leave. He

had tried to oppose with weapons in hand, but the Germans had declared themselves willing to use guns. Given the logic of reasoning, the Germans took the locomotives and we lost very valuable material.

Paoletti feel entirely annulled. Scarce and sometimes conflicting news came from the Head of Delegation of Intendenza or derived from various protests. On the morning of the 6th at 09:00, passed Gen. De Stefanis who informed the likely arrival of units of the XXI Corp for the defense of the sector. Meanwhile a German officer blew up the water systems, another the railway and a third positions of Flak and the depots. "*Thus I had the absolute feeling that no German division remained*" Gen. Paoletti wrote in his report. Instead all the Italian staff was still in place. At 13:30 the Navy Command of Marsa Matruh learned by chance by an officer of the *Luftwaffe* that the British were about forty kilometers and were preparing to turn the sector. Now Paoletti - always free of orders - had enough and decided on a general evacuation.

Let me be clear: such incidents can always occur when a sudden breakthrough following the interruption of connections and the pressure of the enemy, and especially when in a fort are different elements of the armed forces and of different nationalities. They occurred on the other side of the hill. However, there is a vivid sense of a not careful organization. Unfortunately, this flaw will be repeated in North Africa, Sicily and the peninsula.

For the 8th Army on November 6 represented an unwelcome but inevitable break in the exploitation of success. All divisions were scattered in the desert short of petrol and supply columns were trouble getting to the armored brigades. Also they occurred serious problems in the transmission caused by distance, interference and confusion for the intense radio traffic.

Late afternoon Lumsden gave new orders. The 10th Arm. Div. would continue to advance along the coast towards Matruh, the 2nd New Zealand and the 7th Armored had to move respectively to *Charing Cross* and Minqar Qaim and the 1st Armored, further south, touching the Siwa track (sketch No. 4). This concentration south of Matruh would enable them to encircle the fortified camp with the New Zealanders and to continue directly on Sidi Barrani and Sollum with the other two divisions. But overnight torrential rain turned the desert into a quagmire, making it impractical many slopes and channeling the movements on the coast. According to Montgomery bad weather was a heavenly help for Rommel because blocked British columns, in fact it did not help the ACIT at all and the coastal road, already clogged beyond belief, refused the new entries in search of safety.

Schizzo n. 4

A hand-drawn map of the S. Boman area. The map shows a network of roads and rivers. Key locations include S. Boman, DAK, XX CA, and various military units like 10th D. cor, 7th D. cor, and 2nd D. NZ. A scale bar at the bottom indicates distances from 0 to 100 Km. A compass rose is located near the center of the map.

7 NOVEMBER.

Only in the afternoon of the 7th a strong wind began to dry and to make viable the ground became a muddy plague, though most of the units of the 10th Corp was not able to take advantage of it immediately because waiting for fuel. The objectives of the second phase were provided by Lumsden it was Sidi Barrani for the 2nd New Zealander and Sollum for the 7th Armored.

To the south of the 13th Corp Horrocks continued to gather groups of stragglers and parts of columns, but

"The task of finding them became so hard and their conditions were so pitiful - wrote the official report of the British - that the corps was assigned the group n. 208 tactical reconnaissance to help in what had become virtually a work of charity. Between 5 and 14 November were captured and sent to the rear about 17,000 Italian prisoners; the most important part was taken by the 13th Corp, which, even with the best intentions, encountered strong difficulties to solve the water problem, the food and the means of transport (...)" ⁽²¹⁾.

So at 7 am was captured the headquarters of the X Corp with Gen. Nebbia and a few hours later the remains of *Pavia*. The journey of the Corps had ended.

The only exceptions to this sad end to the protagonists was the Ramcke brigade and XXXI sappers battalion, who through numerous vicissitudes They arrived to emerge and to resume connection. The first occurred at 10:00 in Matruh, reduced to 600 men, through the capture of a certain number of enemy vehicles. The second, commanded by an able officer, Maj. Caccia Dominioni, had arrived at noon on the 6th: having failed to track down in the night of the 5th the motorized echelon of the *Brescia*, which had to tag along, he continued on his own, for a time along with the paratroopers of Gen. Ramcke, met by chance, and then separately.

In the morning Rommel spoke with Gen. De Stefanis, he can not consider the further recovery of other units. Besides, even the *Panzerdivisionen* were not much better. After the clash of El Qasaba, the 21st was left with just four tanks efficient and one infantry battalion and, moreover, had been forced to abandon almost all the guns ⁽²²⁾. Summing up, there was only to be hoped to be able to hold positions for as long as possible. But apparently it was written that the troubles were to continue.

For the entire day raids R.A.F. easily reaped indescribable chaos existing on the coast and the 90th Light of Gen. von Sponeck was seriously engaged by the 8th Arm. Bd. in the coastal stretch. In exchange, the fighting was not long because Gen. Gatehouse, commander of the 10th Arm. Div., Preferred to leave the task of the attack to the 133rd Mot. Bd., Still far away.

However, the British pressure had been perceived and in partly for

this, in part to the emergence of a winding from the south by a large column from Bir Khalda and headed northwest, Rommel decided to abandon Matruh even before it was too late. In fact the enemy forces were not as close as feared. Most of the 1st Arm. Div. was blocked without gas and the 7th Arm. Div., who had met the day before the 21st *Panzer*, was always in the east of Minqar Qaim. The New Zealanders, for their part, were reorganizing south of Sidi Haneish. Thus the reports made by the German spy probably exaggerated news, not being able to differentiate the elements of the 10th Corp and some recon units of the 2nd Arm. Bd.

To Rommel that was enough. He began by put away now than it used immediately, namely the remains of the XX and XXI Corp, the Ramcke Brigade and the 164th Light. De Stefanis had to stop for the moment at Bug Bug, Navarini should instead clear the men in the rear and stop at Halfaya with his command to take charge of the sector. Even the 164th was shunted to the rear.

Evidently it was necessary to clarify a lot of things with Delease, the *Comando Supremo* and the OKW, and Rommel asked for an interview with Barbasetti the 8th at Sidi Barrani. Then he disseminated the bulletin. Trod a little colors on the local situation of Matruh, not bother to put in full evidence two concepts:

"2. With the actual weakness still exist the ACIT is not able to keep the area of Marsa Matruh and the south-west longer. On November 8, they will therefore be withdrawn at the CTA [German Corp of Africa], the 90th Light Division and the *Panzergranadier Afrika* Regiment namely near Sidi Barrani and east of that area (...).

8. In the fiercest fighting of the last two weeks, the army has lost, in addition to a large number of Italian troops to enemy action the bulk of tanks, heavy anti-tank weapons and heavy anti-aircraft guns, as well as field guns. This loss its strength is weakened, the result that it is very doubtful whether a renewed attack of the enemy, following large front and that is by far predominant, it can be successfully repelled the front-Halfaya Sollum. "

NOVEMBER 8.

Even before dawn on the 8th, the English advanced elements entered Matruh, quietly abandoned by the rearguard of the 90th Light. At the same time the *Comando Supremo* received news of the Anglo-American landings in Morocco and Algeria.

While reserving to deal separately with respect to operation *Torch*, we see how the problem of the ACIT was considered. Speaking with von Rintelen, Cavallero told him that Rommel did not feel at all sure I can hold the positions of Sollum-Halfaya, and showed himself to some extent persuaded and resigned: "*Needless – he remarked bitterly - ask Rommel insurance to resist at Sollum, because these would require to give him in turn the means that*

we can no longer give him. It is also unnecessary to send the troops to be made prisoners. The Italian divisions that were in Egypt are gone. "And, to Gen. Weninger charged by Kesselring to learn about Italian intentions, he said: " *He [Rommel] give today the general directives leaving him to decide the composure to keep "* ⁽²³⁾.

Cavallero in the afternoon saw Gen. Gandin, returning from Africa, and evidently thought that an encouragement and an implicit constraint would not spoiled; but the form of the message was by far the least indicated on Rommel to hold, like any other commander in his place ⁽²⁴⁾.

As for concrete measures, in addition to shipping units, tanks and aircraft to Tripoli and Benghazi, the Comando Supremo ordered that Rommel, who arrived at the border, to assume responsibility for the entire defense of Marmarica, that is, until the meridian of Bir Hacheim, taking responsibility directly for the ports of Bardia and Tobruk and all the forces already located or in process of preparing positions to defend. Barbasetti would continue in his duties, but reducing in his powers to the western Cyrenaica. The units and organs not specifically involved in the Marmarica fight were to pass to at the disposal of Mar. Bastico, moving west of el Agheila.

Barbasetti hastened to assure to the ACIT had given strict orders for the transfer of jurisdiction; then he wanted to put the points on the: "*In determining the grid, I would be grateful - wrote Rommel - if you bear in mind that Italian troops, including elements of the Pistoia division, have very few vehicles & then they can not depart from the street*" ⁽²⁵⁾. Considering this is not enough, he turned to Cavallero:

"I would ask to be received in time for Rommel seek authoritative directive that the remainder of our armored or motorized troops, such as the *Giovani Fascisti*, if it arrive on time, & *Pistoia*, should not serve, them alone, to protect withdrawal of German troops that are all vehicles, but protection function that is at least adequately distributed, in proportion to the means which can be disengaged" ⁽²⁶⁾.

Bastico had already put forth, on the basis of personal experience, and sent a private letter to Cavallero, through his Chief of Staff, Gen. Giglioli. The news coming from the Egyptian front, he observed, were such as to impose to consider the situation very seriously and you could not ignore that any retreat from El Alamein to el-Agheila left much perplexed about the amount and efficiency of units They would be able to retreat to the gates of Tripoli. It was no longer, in fact, of the 600 kilometers of the withdrawal of the previous autumn, but in 1200 ahead battling enemy forces far superior, especially in aircraft and armored vehicles. He remembered, too, that in accordance with the directives issued by Mussolini in July, Cyrenaica could be

the battlefield, but Tripoli had to be defended at all costs. Now, the availability of troops on which he Bastico, mattered more was that note and made necessary measures of exception. *"You know much better than me - He concluded -What it is at stake. Every word more, for my part, would then be unnecessary"* ⁽²⁷⁾.

Rommel had also learned of the Allied landings in French North Africa. *"This meant the end of the Army of Africa"* had to comment sadly. At noon headed to Sollum proceeded to see how the retreat. He met *Oberquartiermeister*, Maj. Otto, who told him of slow traffic manifesting concerns for supplies to the combat units for the difficulty to go against the current of motor vehicles. Then Rommel decided to avoid the coast road to the next retreat of the bulk of the army: the XX Corp and the 3rd Recon. Bn. and, subsequently, the DAK would be passed behind to Bir Habata so when it was the turn of the rear guard, the 90th Light would find the open road and the passes cleared. Fortunately, on the evening traffic it appeared much dispatched, so as to authorize some hope that would end around the following noon.

9 NOVEMBER.

The ability to stop the opponent on the border there were conflicting opinions. While initially Cavallero was kept to a very realistic assessment, Kesselring intervention and the news brought by Colonel. pilot Gallo, following Gandin (the 5th Air Fleet ready deployment on new fields of Marmarica, increasing number of aircraft efficient, very orderly withdrawal of troops, about 10,000 armored and wheeled vehicles of the ACIT), had changed in the first part impression. It did not seem unreasonable to suppose they could stop the 8th Army making massive with aviation continuously, even for just a few days. The change in perspective, already surfaced in a lengthy phone call to Mussolini, at 10:00, it was confirmed an hour later in an interview with von Rintelen: *"I affirm that the situation improves or N.A. seems better that we go stabilizing and that Rommel could do something about the position of Halfaya, or at least to resist more, especially with the arrival of the convoy"* ⁽²⁸⁾.

We should also say that Cavallero did not believe the very dark colors with which he was presented the picture of the ACIT. On the afternoon of the 7th, during a phone call to Mussolini, he had mentioned the Rommel-Gandin interview, which had just arrived the report, and commented: *"Obviously Rommel exaggerates this [severity of losses] to justify his retreat"* ⁽²⁹⁾. This explains the directives that at 09:00 Cavallero transmitted to Kesselring and, of course, extended to Gen. Fougier, head of the G.S. the of Air Force:

"The evolving situation in N.A. confirms the possibility to organize a defense line Sollum-Halfaya. A precondition of this possibility is the contribution of air forces enough to beat armored forces, after

regained the necessary freedom of action in the air.

The deployment to the fields in the area of Tobruk, their logistic possibilities, the satisfactory fuel situation help that effort can be carried out with maximum efficiency.

On the immediacy of this effort lies the greater chance to resist the predetermined line (...) " ⁽³⁰⁾.

Directives seem questionable, especially considering the rank of the recipients. They express a confident hope that a more explicit operating direction; are not quite in keeping with the dispatch posted at the previous afternoon by Rommel ("*Duce, while leaving you free to act, you want that you take most of the above into account*"); are based on an assumption entirely devoid of realism ("*air force sufficient to defeat armored forces, after regaining the necessary freedom of action in the air*"), when just the night before the *Desert Air Force* had sent 47 Wellington and 8 Halifax just to make maximum destruction of the traffic in the area of Halfaya Pass.

In Egypt, the ACIT had the DAK and the Menton group in Sidi Barrani, the XX Corp with the 3rd Recon Bn. At the escarpment of Sollum, in the area of Bir Habata; the XXI Corp, with the *Pistoia* Inf. Div., at the Halfaya; the 580th Recon Bn. in Sidi Omar; the 164th Light and the Ramcke brigade at Bardia; the 90th Light in the rear about forty kilometers east of Sidi Barrani. The *Giovani Fascisti*, abandoned Siwa, was moving to Giarabub taking with it the 4th Libyan battalion, also forgot at Ras Qattara, on the edge of depression. Rommel had to keep Sidi Barrani up to 10:00, so as to rescue the thousand vehicles that still lay to the east of Sollum, however, he felt the negative weight of the low level of equipment in tow: a lack of ammunition and just a *unfoc* day of fuel.

The meeting with the head of Delease asked by Rommel took place at 14:00 of the 9th, near the Fort Capuzzo, in a decidedly tense atmosphere. Barbasetti at dawn had received a message from Cavallero commenting on the mission of Gandin ⁽³¹⁾. He began, therefore, by showing the telegram with the directives of Mussolini, retransmitted by Delease to the ACIT, about the battle of arrest in opposite Sollum-Halfaya. Rommel said to have had it, but strangely enough, it does not emphasized the full freedom of action left to him.

After such a prologue, Barbasetti said coldly very painful sacrifice of X Corps, abandoned in the desert, despite the sending of the known 150 trucks, and stressed that the Italian units, without means, took longer than the German to move therefore they should not be too removed from the road. The mention of the trucks was indeed misguided, but Rommel did not miss this opportunity for recriminations and argues instead that the corps would have perhaps saved if the withdrawal had not been suspended for one day "*following the order coming from Rome to resist*

in place", the accusation very far-fetched as the first rigid, and determining, constraint had been from Hitler: victory or death!

Dropped the subject for obvious reasons of expediency, Barbasetti asked to know the thought of his interlocutor on the defense of Cyrenaica. Rommel was categorical: the *Giovani Fascisti* was the paper on which he had counted to hold the line Sollum-Halfaya-Sidi Omar, but unfortunately would not come in time. Consequently, it might as well continue to Gialo directly to el-Agheila. Besides, he did not expect to stop at the border more than half a day, intending to avoid at any cost the hooking by the enemy. Barbasetti tried to protest: "*We can not forget that the order is to stand here!*", But he obtained nothing. Indeed Rommel was even more rude. They needed only motorized troops; those who did not have means to motorize were lost and therefore: no further sending foot units to the border and clearance by air to Italy of all the elements that would not have been possible to provide means, in order to minimize the potential prisoners. After all, he was right.

Barbasetti did not fail to point out that the endless column that wound on Via Balbi, and that he had climbed in reverse, appeared composed almost entirely of German trucks, many of them carrying things useless or even empty. But he tried in vain to obtain the return of the Italian XX Truck Bn., ceded to the Germans in the spring of the previous year, on the formation of DAK. "*We had then a few lively sentences - Barbasetti later recalled - I pointed out that he wanted justice that would not be repeated because of El Alamein, where remained five Italian divisions and that the sacrifices had to be shared equally between Italian and German*" ⁽³²⁾.

On one point Rommel ended up agreeing and worth dwelling on because in this regard his behavior seemed to justify the allegations of neglect and abandonment of Italian troops against him under various circumstances. As we know, the Comando Supremo had decided to pass Marmarica to the jurisdiction of the ACIT as soon as it reached the border. The measure was only logical, being now in the rear of the army and, probably, the next battlefield. Rommel instead, and against the expressed desire always to exercise full power over a wide area behind him, had replied immediately rejecting and advancing a strange proposal:

"Notified that due to the severe lack of means of connection, are not in possession of the instrument necessary to take command also [emphasis added] command of Italian troops in eastern Cyrenaica (...)."

At the same time he had asked that Barbasetti maintained unchanged the limit of his powers, taking "*all tactical measures in close cooperation with me*" ⁽³³⁾. In fact, he alluded to the report

Italians already posted positions Sollum-Halfaya-Sidi Omar, as Barbasetti explain and specify how the field marshal in his memoirs ⁽³⁴⁾. Recalling that the Italian troops on the border had been asked by the Rommel's orders to Gen. Navarini, specially stopped there with the command of the XXI Corp, it is clear that Rommel was trying to transfer to Barbasetti the fate of the Italian unit left without transport, to reserve to himself the conduct of the German forces, all motorized, with the small addition of the remains of the XX Corp, which in practice were single mass with those of DAK. So it would not be reprimanded again for the abandonment of the Italian. The idea of a command to them was so far away from the logic of tactics as well as from elementary common sense, which of course could not be sustained. When Barbasetti took over as he already had not even hesitated to give direct orders to the commander of the Fort of Tobruk, Rommel came to agree: "*All right, the command will continue as in the past*" ⁽³⁵⁾. But he did not write this in his notes.

The summary of the meeting was telegraphed to Cavallero that evening:

"Had a long conversation with Rommel. The issue of command - announced Barbasetti - that he intended reported at troops in the line is resolved since he agreed that command must be unique; His proposal tended to me only to save motorized German troops who are sacrificing all those Italian non-motorized. He said that given the forces available he can not oppose appreciable resistance of known line & I do not oppose as deduced by following orders from given him: garrison Siwa and Giarabub withdraw on Gialo-Agheila; send no other non-motorized troops on the note line & a result no new dispatch of battalions by air to Cyrenaica; mobile & artillery troops of Tobruk that you can clear are evicted as is already been started by Germans to Tobruk without telling us.

He having said that he can not let engage the enemy, which will be practically at the first enemies cannon shots he will leave his current position with motorized troops to reach, as he said, possibly Sirtica. West Ain Gazala has already much cleared of vehicles with understanding reached Berta & likely continue.

Having toi asked our return truck Bn. & comradely help to truck transport at least a part our soldiers with his trucks, which are vastly superior in number to ours & also carry many useless things or retreat empty, he refused claiming to be indispensable for truck transport his troops.

Having also asked that withdrawal maneuver is conducted so that even a few of our motorized troops are safeguarded, promised that employ battalions of the *Pistoia* along the Balbia. For the remaining Italian elements flowed from behind or from the rear, believed to be evicted to Italy by air or any means to decrease the number prisoners. For my part I do everything possible to save that is allowed us, over what services I could already move back to the advantage of Tripolitania. Bastico warn of this situation and any inflows ". ⁽³⁶⁾

When Rommel returned to his command, he had the feeling that the British pressure is accentuated in the area of Sidi Barrani, therefore decided the withdraw of the ACIT positions on the border.

The protection of the movement had to be ensured by the 90th Light and the 3rd Recon Bn. deployed at Bug Bug.

10 NOVEMBER.

As was to be expected, the report of Barbasetti left Cavallero more annoyed than surprised. He convened for 10:15 with von Rintelen and made their grievances: the Comando Supremo had organized resistance to Sollum-Halfaya-Sidi Omar and ordered to defend the place and the OKW had confirmed "*but we can not expect this is done beyond the possible*". For more it was necessary to react "*to a tendency of Rommel that depends on his well known psychology*". And he continued, warning that during the retreat from the border to El Agheila would not tolerate the renewal of what occurred from El Alamein to Sollum, namely that the Italian units were "*sacrificed by events*" (he did not say, as he thought, "*by the Germans*"). Unlike the psychological repercussions would be very serious. The *cahier de doléances** was fed. First, Rommel had said he would do resistance at the border; Well "*I will not do.*" According to Rommel he had communicated not want to take command of Italian troops on the line predicted. Third, the Comando Supremo ordered to withdraw of the *Giovani Fascisti* on Sidi Omar, but Rommel had not executed the order and only after a second operation had joined; of course too late. Fourth: Rommel was retreating with about 10,000 vehicles, of which only a quarter Italian, and refused to return the XX truck Bn. lent his time to be his essential support, while many of his trucks were loaded with useless things and even empty. Well, that OKW *required* of Rommel the restitution of the truck Bn.

Four points in dispute, only the command had already been obtained by Barbasetti; starting the *Giovani Fascisti* to el-Agheila seemed inevitable and perhaps preferable to the availability in Sidi Omar and other well-armed infantry; the return of the infamous truck Bn, which by the way was probably scattered among various units and bodies of the Germans, was "arranged" by von Rintelen with the idea of forcing Rommel instead to ensure transportation of the *Pistoia*, he proposed that Cavallero agreed to extend "*everything you need to Bardia and Sollum -Halfaya, all that is from Tobruk forward*". As to the principle subject, Cavallero did not show hesitation in stating that "*we should now abandon the Cyrenaica to have forces more collections. You can maneuver between Sollum and the Tunisian border, because the distance is too great. We should restrict ourselves, especially since it opens the way to Tunis.*" This is the gist of the conversation.

Let's see how it was translated into practice. Cavallero had prepared the following dispatch:

"Marshal Rommel. Duce having been familiarized with your communications of

*French = from French history meaning a list of grievances

yesterday and this morning. He believes that if a quite prolonged resistance positions Sollum-Halfaya was not performed, would be jeopardized even possible to prepare defense line Marsa el-Brega. All the more so that the development situation in the French North African & already started our intervention make it even more essential not to rush the events in Cyrenaica & ensure strong defense Tripoli to take full advantage of the benefits that the new situation presents.

Over at resistance on the line Sollum-Halfaya it is essential that any withdrawal is done systematically for subsequent changes in order to gain time & ensure orderly withdraw of forces & means of Cyrenaica. Duce recalls your personal attention to the need to be assured the outflow of Italian forces not motorized by pooling all available means to compensate for large deficiency transportation on part of the Italians.

Duce want your communication on the content of this telegram. Ugo Cavallero”⁽³⁷⁾.

The message leaves somewhat uncertain. Operational requirements that advised or rather ordering them to buy time to the Egyptian border were illustrated very clearly. However, it lacked a very important detail: how many days it was necessary to ensure? Sure, Cavallero knew he could not be precise. Ignorant of the real balance of power that would have occurred as soon as the British 10th Corp had come in contact with the ACIT; He did not know how long it would have resulted in the evacuation of Cyrenaica; He did not know what it would take to achieve the desired defensive organization at el-Agheila. On the other hand, he thought it likely a enemy landing in Sollum⁽³⁸⁾. Ultimately, he was not able to indicate with sufficient approximation the minimum gain of time to obtain at any cost. Already this omission was enough because the commander in the field would have to act according to their appreciation and interest of his army rather than according to the needs of the defense of Tripoli. Furthermore there was the belief - well-founded - that Rommel would still have acted in his own way. The final sentence seems enlightening were envisaged objections. So one can not speak of directives or, even less, of orders. Not for nothing is repeated the formula note: "*The Duce believes*" Given, then, that it came to discussing you could not use in the presence of Barbasetti place for an unequivocal clarification? And most importantly, it was better to decide for an interview with Rommel?

Presumably this was also thinking of Mussolini. When it was read, by telephone, the message, did not seem very convinced, so that said not to send it, and instead of going in person to discuss the subject. Cavallero but insisted he was leaving for Libya, but also considered appropriate to transmit the telegram. Mussolini consented.

At 14:25 he arrived in Rome a communication of the OKW for Rommel, caused by von Rintelen. It was very dry and essentially ordered to accept without question the orders of the Comando Supremo:

"In accordance with the order of the Duce, the Führer There is obliged to take all measures to ensure the gain of time required for the clearing of

Cyrenaica. And in particular the Führer calls to your responsibilities, so that any further movement in retreat are organized to enable the disengagement from the enemy also of non-motorized formations, including the division *Pistoia* " ⁽³⁹⁾.

That evening Rommel's army had collected between the sea and Sidi Omar (sketch No. 5). The 90th Light was a Upper and Lower Sollum, the *Pistoia* held the stretch of Halfaya, at Fort Capuzzo was the DAK and further back, in Sidi Azeiz, there was the XX Corp. North of Capuzzo towards Bardia, the Menton group and was placed on the south side, in the area of Sidi Omar, the X / 7th Bersaglieri, 3rd and the 580th Recon. Bns. The meeting with the troops deployed on the border had not increased by much the ACIT, since the *Pistoia* (Gen. Falugi) was not a simple tactical grouping ⁽⁴⁰⁾.

Overall, the strength of the ACIT included 2,000 Italians and as many Germans deployed by Sollum in Sidi Omar, with twenty anti-tank guns and sixty field artillery. On the rear, in reserve, the DAK and XX Corp put together 3,000 Germans and 500 Italians, with eleven *Panzer* and ten M 14 efficient, twenty anti-tank canons, 24 anti-aircraft and 25 field. Rather little. When the threat of a turning from the south had become real, the retreat would become inevitable. Could only weigh the abandonment of a conquered territory with many sacrifices, but "*stupid and irresponsible for a commander to ask troops evidence of value that does not respond to military needs,*" said Rommel ⁽⁴¹⁾. Clearly, then, that he had no intention of accepting battle or at the border, in Marmarica.

Apart from this approach, the timing of events has some uncertainty. From a communication of Mancinelli to Deleaze, broadcast on the morning of 11 November, but certainly filled in the night before, it seems that in all the 10th Rommel had not yet made a decision, was ready to pull up stakes:

"Intention when Rommel must clear Halfaya is to fall back on line the eastern edge Tobruk-El Adem. Later on line Ain Gazala. Will try to slow down as much as possible the movement whose rhythm but remains essentially imposed by initiative enemy.

It is still not possible to determine whether the Halfaya position will be maintained over the day today. ACIT command has prepared withdrawing the *Pistoia*. German columns have orders to gather now west of Berta". ⁽⁴²⁾

On the other hand the XXI Corp was unable to make contact by the radio with the ACIT and ignored where the command of the army he was, nor was briefed by German connection officers. Navarini, who also do not easily to lose his composure, had in mind the nightmare of an imminent renewal of the abandonment of the lines of El Alamein. His chief of G.S., Col. Ledda, noted sadly in his diary that town, according to a message of Deleaze, if withdrawn the *Pistoia* had to rely on its own resources, "*thus*

Schizzo n. 5

[illegible]

22^a B. cor.

-Comment -*it is to be assumed that most of the infantry will not be able to withdraw*". But Rommel was now alert to the issue and was careful to talk about it in a telegram to Cavallero and, for information, the OKW, OKH and Delease:

"Please talk to the Duce:

1. The forces still remained very small force to conduct combat to play for time. With this strategy of fighting to play for time trying to delay as long as possible the enemy advance gains in this way time for an orderly evacuation of Cyrenaica. It is moreover not yet possible to predict the duration of these operations. This depends on the strength of the enemy pressure.

2. Particular attention is given to the withdrawal of non-motorized divisions of Italian troops. It was given the order that the Italian soldiers are transported by the German columns and, so far as [!] To be picked up by isolated German trucks. Unfortunately it is not possible to provide the columns, as required by Delease, for the heavy losses of our vehicles and the large number of German soldiers not motorized. The division *Pistoia* has not yet been used on the front lines; in clearing location Sidi Omar-Sollum-Halfaya it will be withdrawn as the first unit".(43)

Meanwhile, the pursuers were as follows. The 2nd New Zealand Inf. Div. arrived in the afternoon, with the 4th Light Arm. Bd.. and the 5th New Zealand Inf. Bd., the slopes of the escarpment Sollum in the coastal sector. The head of the 7th Arm. Div., ie the 22nd Arm. Bd. who had followed the trail of Bir el Khamsa, had managed to overcome the border fence near el-Beida, about 25 kilometers south of Sidi Omar, with the intention of turning north to encircle Fort Capuzzo.

Arrived at the border, Montgomery lifted his foot off the accelerator: there were difficulties – of supplying the effort and would not but increase, leaving the 8th Army advanced divisions at the mercy of a sudden reaction of Rommel, from which was to be expected anything. He even refused the offer of aerial supply advanced from Mar. Tedder, commander of the RAF in the Middle East, and not even flinch when the other man told him that on the date of 10 November the 21st *Panzer* was reduced to 11 tanks efficient and the 15th *Panzer* did not have a single one. He was indifferent to the news that the ACIT was with a quarter of *unfoc* and fuel for four or five days ⁽⁴⁴⁾. Therefore arranged a stopover in the area Bardia- Fort Capuzzo -Sidi Omar -SidiAzeiz. The armored regiments could also continue in the race.

While the 4th Light Arm. Bd. was explained to engage with fire the Italo-German defenses facing Sollum, Freyberg, who was following in the movement, ordered Gen. Kippenberger to bring with him the 5th brigade on the escarpment, proceeding along the outside track Bug Bug-Bir Habata and to advance towards the north-west until reaching behind the Halfaya pass, hoping to capture at least a part of ACIT rearguard. Kippenberger was moving slowly on broken terrain when a sudden countermand brought him back into the coastal plain: Freyberg had received reports

both the passage of the 7th Arm. Div. of Bir Habata and of the sudden retreat units of the 90th Light from Lower Sollum. It was clear that the German rearguard was hurrying to reach the plateau of Upper Sollum, so that seemed undeniable difficulties encountered by the 4th Light Arm. Bd., struggling with old minefields remained in the area and under the fire of the artillery of the Axis.

The British aerial reconnaissance was providing sufficient guidance on the defenses prepared at the border, but Freyberg saw his division wide spread of depth and it was uncertain whether or not to wait for the following day to take forceful action. After mature consideration, and based on the information brought from patrols, Kippenberger was commissioned to occupy the Halfaya pass with an overnight coup.

2. THE WITHDRAW ON LINE OF EL-GAZALA.

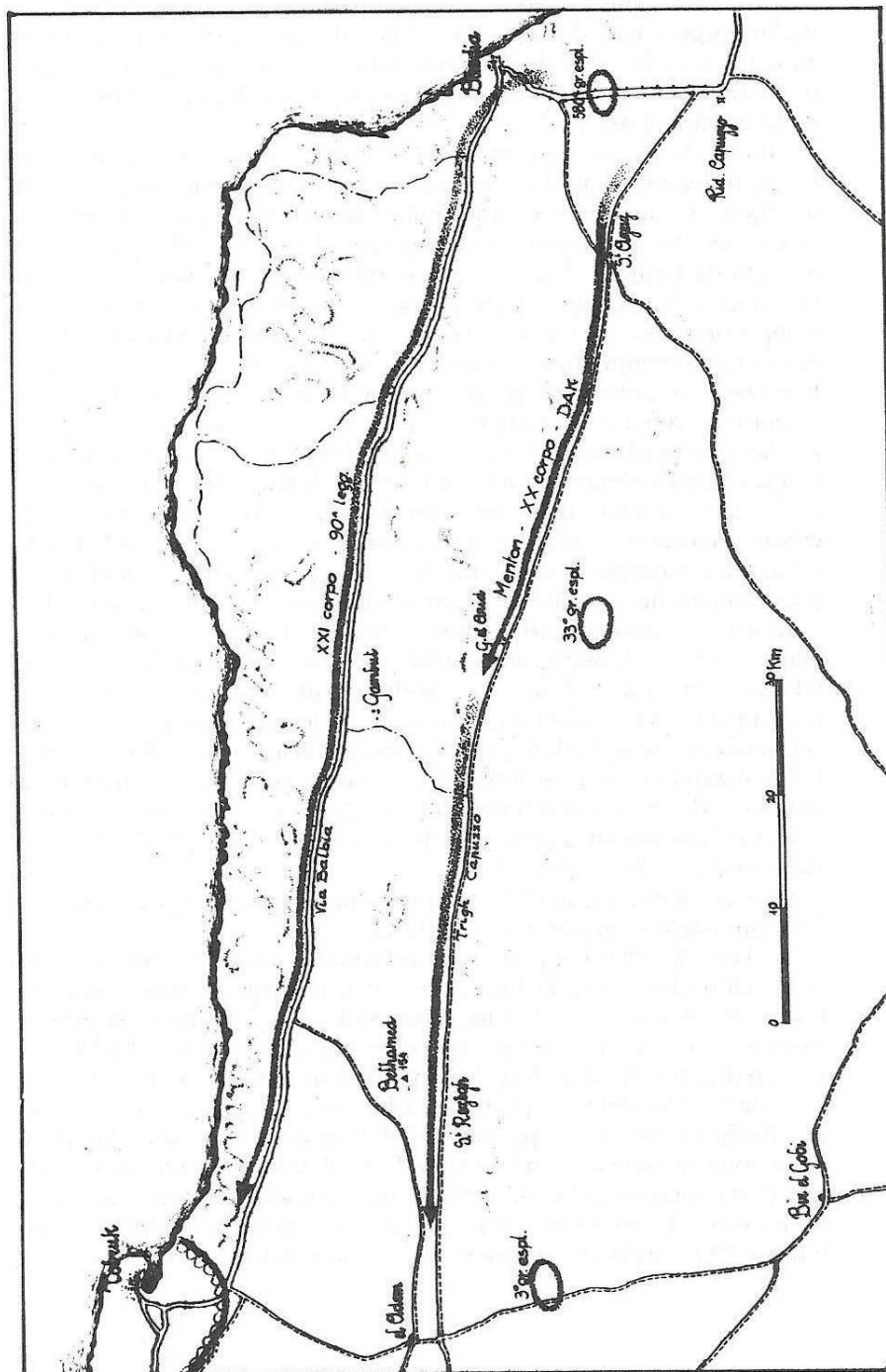
At 05:00 of 11 November restored radio contact, Navarini received a message of ACIT completed the night before. In anticipation of the enemy attack, Rommel indicated the measures to be taken against an attempt to break through the front in the stretch Sollum-Halfaya and against a probable simultaneous action outflanking from the south and tending to Tobruk. For the first need the XXI Corp was to fall back at 06:00 on Bardia; the 90th Light would protect the movement and in turn would carry on Via Balbi after having blown up the prepared delimitation of the road. For the latter was expected a safety curtain, facing the desert, with the 580th Recon. Bn. south of Bardia to guarantee the XXI Corp (which was intended to be in the next rearguard retreat), the 33rd Recon. Bn. south of Gambut and the 3rd in the south-east of El Adem. In the shelter of this screen, the DAK, XX Corp and the Menton KG had to traveling into Gasr el-Arid, ready to intervene on the flank of possible British attempt (sketch No. 6).

While armored and motorized units, promptly reached by the order, they set in motion at 05:00 on the Trigh Capuzzo, the XXI Corp busied itself as soon as possible and immediately found itself in crisis. Although in the late previous afternoon the ACIT could provide a short warning via a notice immediately participated the *Pistoia*, something did not work properly. Unfortunately the units at Halfaya were invested in the dark of night, recklessly without security measures, while loading the means: it was much of the 35th Inf. and three German batteries. Fortunately the fire of a battalion formation, made with the remains of the 164th Light, managed to stop the New Zealanders, in broad daylight, already on their way to the north, so that the Gen. von Sponeck, who rushed to assess for himself the situation in that area, barely had time to go back and to rescue the 90th Light from the envelopment ⁽⁴⁵⁾.

The withdrawal of the ACIT from border (11 November).

Schizzo n. 6

IL RIPIEGAMENTO DELL'ACIT DAL CONFINE
(11 novembre)



The circumstances could only strengthen Rommel in the conviction that they must avoid the mistake made at the time by the British to withdraw into Tobruk, now patently devoid of operational meaning. It was enough to stop all of the 12th on the line Tobruk-El Adem to facilitate the slow flow of the retreating elements and unlocking of the jam arisen at Ain el-Gazala. These were groups with no real weight war, headed to Sirte, which was necessary to prevent constituted obstruction of maneuver and the faster moving units of the ACIT.

Also the issue of fuel was back heavy. Although units possessed a range of 100-150 kilometers, which however did not assure tranquility throughout Marmarica nothing else existed, nor could provide a timely flow of supplies from Benghazi being the few transport engaged at most. It was therefore an urgent aerial supply to Tobruk. Unfortunately in these situations they occurred mistakes and arrived by air 1,300 men, in spite of the repeated calls of Rommel not to send personnel, worth the risk of having to them leave behind for lack of trucks.

However, given the so rapid development of events, that remained was to accelerate the process. The Italian garrison of the Fort of Tobruk (Gen. Cassata) had a consistency very relative ⁽⁴⁶⁾ and moreover, despite the order of resistance to the bitter end imparted from the ACIT the 10th, the two German battalions that kept the defensive wall were unexpectedly evacuated on the morning of the 11th ⁽⁴⁷⁾. Moreover, in the afternoon Rommel called Cassata to his Tactical Command, provisionally established near the Via Balbi about thirty kilometers west of Tobruk, and informed him that the 90th Light was coming to the Fort and that the positions had to be kept only until noon of the 12th. After that, the garrison will be started directly on Marsa el-Brega, after the destruction of the non-transportable. *"Tomorrow night - he pointed out - someplace at Bomba, because I'm not sure that the defense of Ain el-Gazala can hold."*

Cassata took more than three hours to return, because of the intense traffic in the direction of Bern.

At Tobruk just found the joint command of the XXI Corp. knowing the orders Cassata received, Navarini immediately deployed at dawn of the 12th the *Pistoia* leave Bardia and by noon he was in Tobruk directed to continue and that, at dawn, all units gathered piecemeal left for Marsa el-Brega .

Meanwhile De Stefanis, brought forward to el-Adem, had undertaken a reorganization of his remaining forces constituting, with permission from Deleaze, a "XX Corps battle group " under the command of Gen. Cantaluppi. But not only were the forces were negligible: 1,500 men and 200 vehicles ⁽⁴⁸⁾. The moral lacked. *"There is in all troops and managers are sorely tried - we read*

in the historical journal of the XX Corp on November 9 -*the clear conviction of the impossibility to arrest in any way the relentless pressure the enemy.*" And the next day: *"The news spread by the radio of the American landings in Algeria and Morocco contributes to consider more pessimistic the situation."*

While the evacuation was taking place at Tobruk, fighting flared at El Adem. It was armored elements thrown forward by the British 10th Corp.

With the conquest of the ridge of Sollum, Montgomery was able to express the satisfaction of having repulsed the invasion of Egypt. Rommel convinced that almost certainly would have continued their retreat up in Ain el-Gazala not linger much in defenses playing for time, prepared to reconsider the troops for the pursuit. The cornerstone of his plan was always maneuvering to avoid in any way, a reversal of the situation by Rommel. Absolutely no intention of incurring the misadventures of Gen. Neame in April 1941, nor in those of Gen. Ritchie and Cunningham in 1942. The steps to be followed were three. First Tobruk, without whose port to power of the army it would have revealed itself unsustainable. Then Benghazi or to build a new logistics base is likely to prey on rich supplies and, perhaps, in the prisoners, given the difficulty of removing them in Italian-German trucks. Finally el-Agheila, who held specific value for the purposes of defense to the east as in the west. Essentially, his intent resulted in seizing the position of el-Agheila, dislodging the ACIT and install the 8th Army; concentrating in the area of el-Mechili a strong mass of armor, ready to throw himself against any enemy penetration that had surpassed El Agheila; to allow the installation of the *Desert Air Force* (Air Vice Marshal Cunningham) in the group of airfields around Derna and Benghazi.

Meanwhile he needed decide how to continue the pursuit. Montgomery had a habit of using for each operation the commander he considered most suitable. So he had done to the border, not hesitating to entrust Freyberg the main part, well that of the New Zealanders were left with the 5th Brigade. Now he had in mind some change, but he preferred to wait for the achievement of the *Gebel* and left Lumsden with the task of proceeding with the 10th Corp.

Stating that Montgomery loved the precision, it is probably an understatement. Especially when his confidence in his subordinates, for that was their high rank, did not reach a high level, he willingly went down into the details and he demanded the execution without variations or impromptu fiddling about. *"I knew - He wrote later - that, in the past, commanders of the Corps and division had their own ideas on how to conduct operations in the desert, and they did not like a firm control from above. This was one of the reasons why we were close to losing Egypt".*⁽⁴⁹⁾ So he said flatly Lumsden of all his supporters would follow

his orders. On the other hand, he ensured the complete success.

So Freyberg was left on the border to reorganize his 2nd New Zealand and Lumsden went to Tobruk with the 7th and the 1st Arm. Div.; the 4th Light Arm. Bd. instead was directed to Acroma with its two armored car regiments, the *Royals* and the 4th/6th South African, for an act of disturbance.

Now, however, Rommel had achieved the predetermined purpose and at 21:15 on the 12th issued the order to withdraw. Navarini had already departed, with his few troops and the *Pistoia*, prescribing of reach in the evening the area Martuba, twenty kilometers southeast of Derna, and then continuing on to Ajdabiya. Now it was necessary to bring back the unit most responsive, entrusting them with the task of keeping the line Ain el Gazala- Temrad least for the whole day of the 13th. The movement, which began shortly before dawn, took place without obstruction and before noon the preset positions were occupied (sketch No. 7). The 13th British troops entered Tobruk.

On the afternoon of the 12th Cavallero's plane landed in Tripoli. He went immediately to Homs, site of the Tactical Command of the Comando Superiore of Libya, where he had a long talk with Bastico. He had already sent, through Gen. Giglioli, the picturesque Directive of the Duce: "*to defend Tripoli to the utmost and, if necessary, with such acts and heroism that should constitute a true epic!*".⁽⁵⁰⁾ Now he said that the events in Tunisia did not concern him, since the presence of other Axis troops in place exclude any danger from that part: "*You, Bastico do not have a west front!*".⁽⁵¹⁾ For now Bastico silent, especially as the main and most urgent concern was really to prepare to better accommodate a wall to which shelter the ACIT.

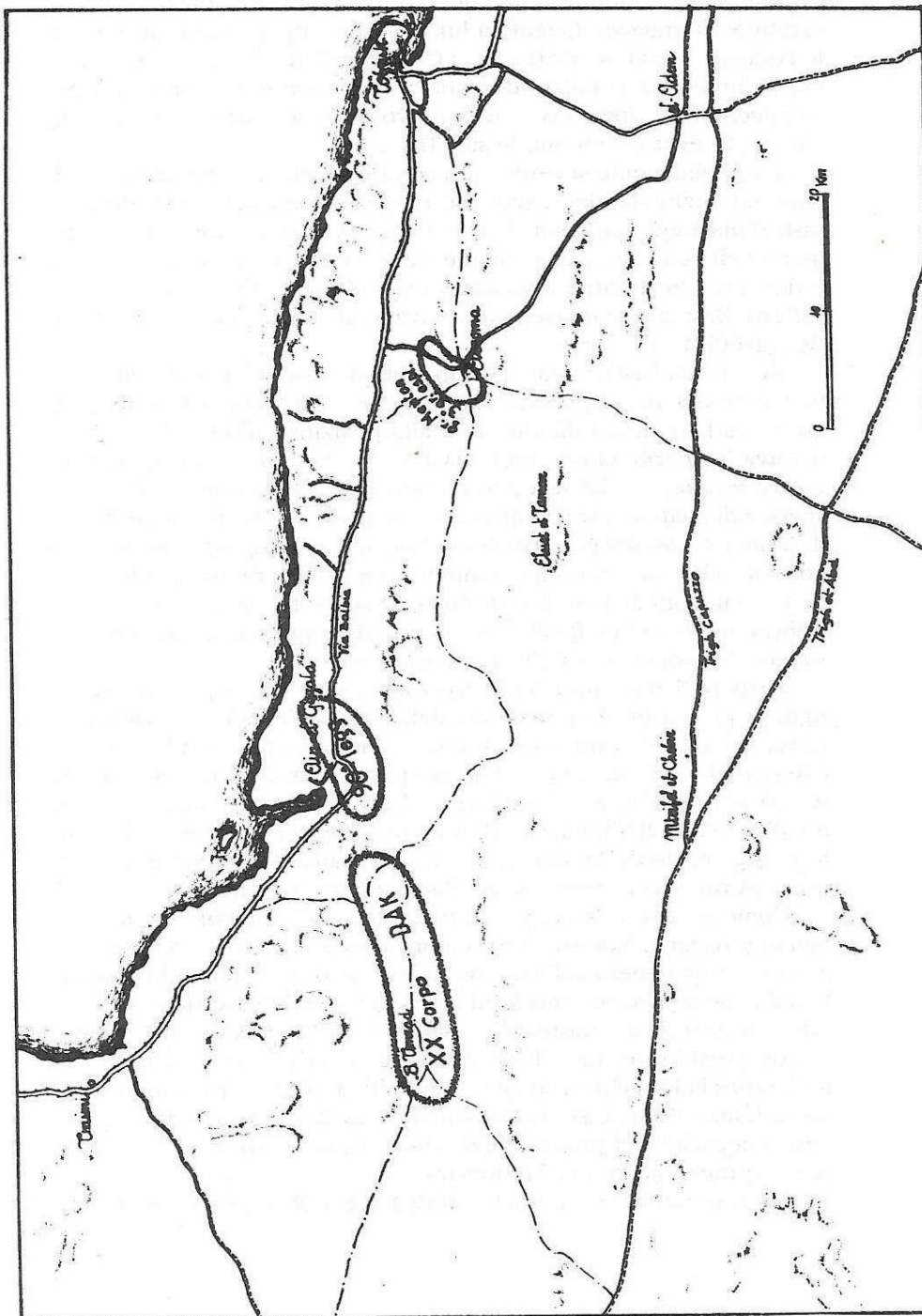
The thought of Cavallero summed up in two concepts, namely the setting up of line Marsa el Brega Agheila-el-Marada and a advanced security structure in Ajdabiya, with the *Spezia* Inf. Div., the *Centauro* Arm. Div. and what was recoverable from Cyrenaica⁽⁵²⁾; and the single command entrusted to Bastico. Rommel would be passes to the employ of these soon came to Ajdabiya and Delease was dissolved. Regardless of the many reservations on the strategic vision of the war in the North African theater, however, still to be determined with the OKW and which we will return, certainly not Cavallero cradled many illusions about the evolution of the struggle in Cyrenaica. On the other hand, it retained a considerable distrust on the intentions and behavior of Rommel. For example, "*I think* - he wrote in his diary that day - *that Rommel's hype*. If he was pressed by many forces, *would not think of keeping today the general line el-Adem east front of Tobruk*". However it was time to thoroughly study all aspects of the operational problem. So, the 13th, Cavallero, Bastico and Giglioli went flying to Benghazi to meet Rommel and Barbasetti.

Rommel also craved an interview with Cavallero

The deployment of the ACIT on Gazala (13 November)

Schizzo n. 7

LO SCHIERAMENTO DELL'ACIT SULLA LINEA DI AIN EL GAZALA
(13 novembre)



and Kesselring. The Allied landings in French North Africa bothered him greatly, especially not being able to assess the actual extent of a double contemporary Axis effort to achieve a solid defense in Tunisia and for rehabilitating the ACIT in Tripoli. It required a decision of a strategic nature and with urgency. As for him, he would not hesitate to pick up the courageous and exhausted troops in Cyrene, in the *Gebel*, and remove by every means to Italy or Greece. But, not having the power of decision, he was to try to bring a solution that somehow avoided a useless sacrifice.

Unfortunately there was a mishap that did not benefit anyone and indeed complicated even more personal relationships between the protagonists of the desperate struggle. For disturbances and interruptions in radio links and a lack of clearly understood, Rommel prepared to receive visitors at Martuba, at the *Fliegerführer*, while Cavallero, Bastico and Barbasetti gathered at the airfield K3 Benghazi ⁽⁵²⁾.

Having noted the absence of the commander of the ACIT, the conference began immediately. The issue of most interest to Cavallero concerned the efficiency due to the location of el-Agheila. There was the *Spezia*, to there was directed the *Giovani Fascisti*, was about to arrive the *Centauro*: also according to Barbasetti in a week you could hope to put together something strong enough. Then Rommel was *not to arrive* on the primary scene for eight days, which is not hard, considering the minor British pressure and decreased raids of the *Royal Air Force*. On the other hand, "*or we stop at el-Agheila* - interjected Bastico - *or do not stop anywhere. But to do this we need to be sure what he wants to keep!*" ⁽⁵³⁾

Barbasetti took advantage of the debate on the defense line of el-Agheila to represent the end of the task of Delease: now nothing remained to be done and, moreover, his personal physical condition does not allow him to hold up longer; He would therefore went to Ajdabiya to oversee the preparation of the defense until the arrival of Rommel. Cavallero, who had been silent on the already established dissolution of Delease, warmly approved his temporary stay "*because otherwise Rommel does not stop.*"

As you can see there were many doubts about the real will of Rommel to stop. Not only seemed to show excessive concern for the evacuation of Cyrenaica, but, according to a confidence made by the head of the information office of ACIT, it would have even considered the possibility of an honorable surrender. ⁽⁵⁴⁾ Neglecting, of course, this particular Cavallero renewed desire to speak with Field Marshal and asked Gen. von Pohl, the German air force attaché in Rome, which was presented at noon communicating the negative outcome of their efforts to track down Rommel, to set an appointment for the next day.

At the meeting it was also investigated whether and where can stiffen

the defense in Tripoli. The opinion of those present was unanimous: not only there was not even to think about a stop at Misrata, but not even the entrenched camp in Tripoli offered guarantees. Then, "*You have to play all out at el-Agheila*". For controlling the position of strength, Bastico and Barbasetti indicated Navarini. In the rear they would have reordered the remnants of the DAK and XX Corp.⁽⁵⁵⁾

After the meeting Cavallero did communicate to Rommel, by Mancinelli, he had given Bastico the first directives for the preparation of the famous line and reserve clarifications in the talk tomorrow in Benghazi. Except that, at 07:20 of the 14th came a telegram from the commander of Benghazi communicating the vain attempts of von Pohl making radio contact with the ACIT. It was assumed that during the day Rommel would arrive in Maraua. Cavallero then canceled the appointment and went to Misrata. It might not have accepted the alleged gesture of impatience and discourtesy. Unfortunately the mix-up continued. Overnight to 15 Delease came in a dispatch by which Rommel declared himself willing to be from 08:00 in the morning on the airfield Barce for the desired meeting, but Barbasetti replied that communication arrived late: the Chief of the Staff General was due to return to Rome⁽⁵⁶⁾. Instead he preferred to stay in Misrata! It is unknown whether he was notified and has refused the interview out of spite or if Barbasetti, in good faith, has neglected to ensure the departure of Cavallero. It would seem more reliable the latter, but the fact remains that, given the circumstances and knowing what problems Cavallero had on the carpet (southern France, Tunisia, Corsica besides Cyrenaica), the conversation with Rommel assumed too much importance to be canceled.

That trip of the Chief of G.S. General presents still other reasons for concern. And with wonder, in fact, that the same evening of the 13th reading a message sent by Barbasetti to Superlibia: "*To Marshal Cavallero. Sorry that short conversation this morning was not granted to maintain you with known line of defense (...)*"⁽⁵⁷⁾. Evidently Cavallero now considered Bastico as his sole representative in N.A. Although during the meeting held at the airfield of Benghazi had said that Delease would remain in operation "as long as Cyrenaica is not abandoned", and calculated possible and necessary to gain time of eight days by Rommel before retreat on el-Agheila, as soon as he arrived in Homs transmit the following dispatch:

"From the 16th current the delegation of the Comando Supremo in N.A. ceases to function. Excellency General Barbasetti with his Chief of Staff, will provide Marshal Bastico for such functions as it may deem to entrust him (...)"⁽⁵⁸⁾.

Cavallero left for Italy at 06:00 of the 15th. Upon arriving in Rome, he received Kesselring and von Rintelen (11:00 hours). He informed them that he had

searched in vain for Rommel, he solicited the arrival of the new commander of the DAK (Gen. Fehn) and asked that the OKW ordered Rommel to stiffen resistance at el-Agheila. Being on the subject, he said that Navarini was "tired" and Barbasetti "finished". Kesselring agreed to the plan: while the retreat to El Alamein had been justified, also because the British supply lines were stretching enormously.

In the afternoon, von Rintelen showed up again to the Comando Supremo. Cavallero, who meanwhile had put Mussolini aware of the trip and the situation, *proposed* Rommel to be ordered to stall another four days and to defend to the bitter end on the positions prepared in the meantime by Bastico. Von Rintelen, at this point, put forward a number of questions, most likely in a personal capacity: was it really necessary to keep Libya? Ought he not rather withdraw to Gabes, Tunisia? He wanted to make a great effort to defend at all costs Tripoli or resist as long as possible? Cavallero said that *"if we go to Gabes, Tunisia is also lost. So, it must be said to Rommel on Agheila must definitely stop "*.⁽⁵⁹⁾ But how could he think to long stop the 8th Army at the gates of Tripoli? The general situation was completely different from that of the previous withdraw!

In those days Rommel had expressed to Mancinelli a black pessimism. Also put back into shape, the armored army that would not be able to buy time. This was the greatest. Probably would have collected in Tripoli more than 100,000 men, Italians and Germans, but it was still the need for an element of reorganization anything but short. Flowed in Tunisia and even reinforced with more troops in place, did not appear capable of competing against the Anglo-American forces, quantitatively and qualitatively predominant and pressing from the west and from the east. The new American tanks resisted the German 50 long antitank gun. All that remained was to realize a Axis Dunkerqe, before it was too late.

Leut. Berndt had just returned from Germany, a prominent military and Nazi official, sent by plane from the Führer personally to submit the proposal of immediate African Dunkirk. Predictably Hitler categorically rejected this hypothesis: first, the measures under way in Tunisia ensured that new front by surprise just behind the ACIT; secondly, the absolute dominion in the British air and naval Mediterranean made it impossible to evacuate the Axis troops from Cyrenaica; Finally, the army would have been supplied with everything via Tripoli. Moreover Hitler had wanted to dictate a few lines of praise, but also cautioned: "I am absolutely certain that the field marshal and his army at El Alamein did everything what was in them, and that the conduct of operations was impeccable. I am also convinced that the withdrawal of *Panzerarmee* on the Fuka line was

really considered after the entire northern sector of the of El Alamein line had fallen into enemy hands"⁽⁶⁰⁾.

3. THE WITHDRAW ON THE EL-AGHEILA LINE.

According to Rommel the line of Ain el-Gazala was the critical point of any retreat westward, and in fact only the ability maneuverable and mobility units could allow the timeliness necessary to get away without suffering serious damage. Now the heavy constraint of always, the deficiency of fuel, not allowed to push on directly to Ajdabiya or, at least, of Benghazi, because the walk the hard of desert tracks would lead to higher consumption. The retreat was therefore follow the Via Balbi, which, in return, would make possible a better operation of services. Of course it was necessary to make come up empty any attempt to circumvent and avoid, with a suitable device, the danger of possible British enveloping moves along the tracks from El Mechili.

For these reasons, without waiting for the pressure of the 8th Army to develop fully, at 02:00 of 14 November Rommel ordered the immediate abandonment of the positions of Ain el-Gazala. By placing now only the mechanizeds unit to maneuver acquired agility. The combat group of the XX Corp and venerated DAK started on the route of the internal *Gebel* (Bir Temrad – el Ezzeiat - Maraua), other units on the Via Balbi. The 90th Light continued to operate as rear guard; he also followed the Balbia, stopping at Beda Littoria-Slonta to provide security at large of the ACIT (sketch No. 8).

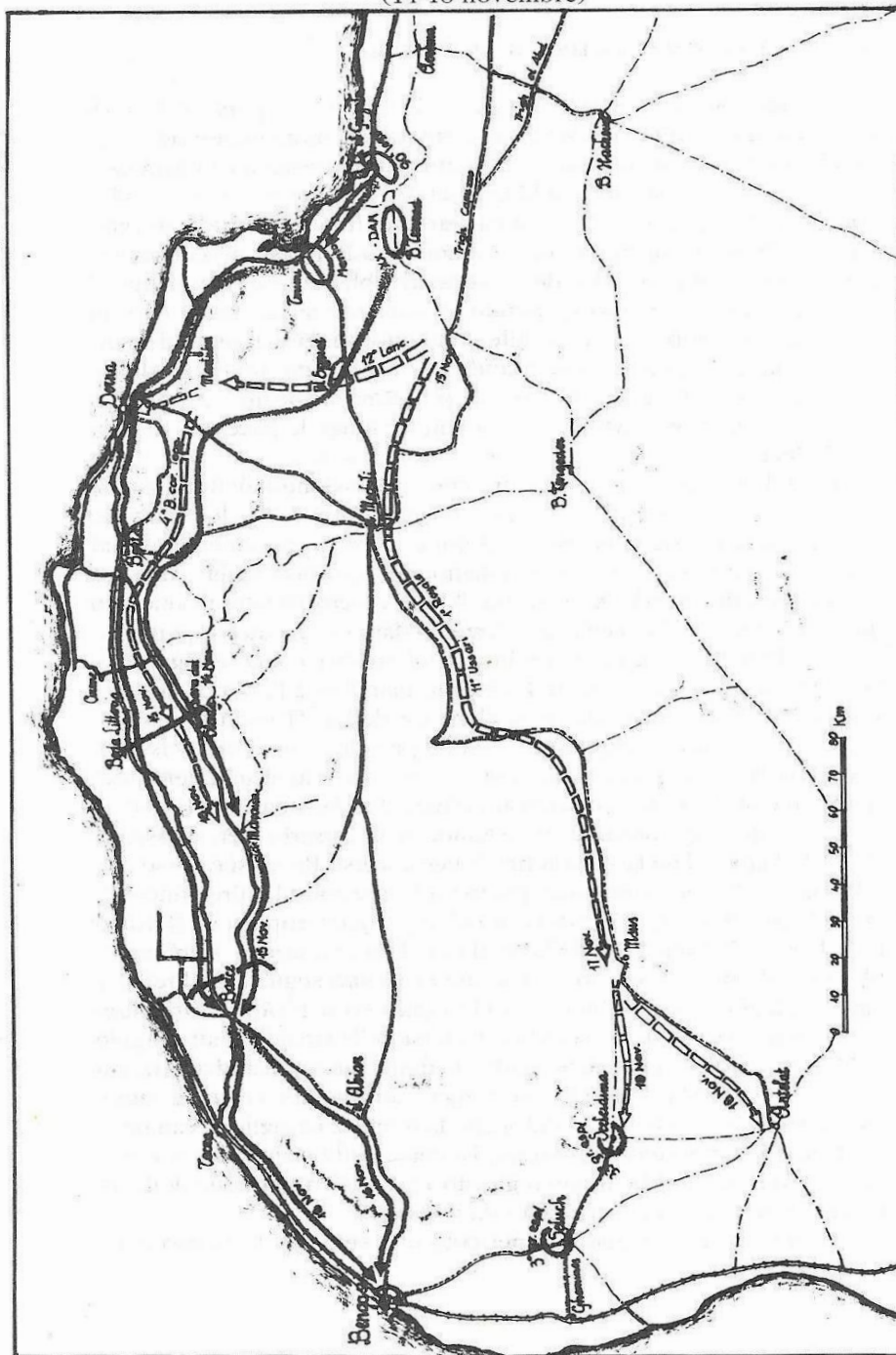
For his part, Montgomery had to make another decision. He could not, at least for now, continue the exploitation of the success with a large group of forces given the logistical situation, and on the other hand did not want to give time to the enemy. Therefore he ordered that the 10th Corp to launch light columns to Benghazi and to Antelat. Lumsden made up four columns under the direction of the 7th Arm. D iv. the 12th Lancers was to occupy the airports of Martuba and Derna; the Command of the 4th light Arm. Bd., with the 4th/6th South African armored cars and a squadron of *Grants*, were to follow the direction Martuba - Maraua-Barce-Benghazi; the 11th *Hussars* and 1st *Royal Dragoons* had responsibility is to take over the landing strip of Msus and then go on to Sceleidima and Antelat to disrupt, at least, the retreat of the ACIT from Benghazi to Ajdabiya. All regiments of armored cars and were reinforced by units of field artillery, anti-aircraft and anti-tank and pioneers. The route of the first two columns through the *gebel* began the 14th from Tobruk; one of the other two through the desert the 15th from el-Adem.

Rommel had smelled the danger and on the evening of the 14th thought it well

The withdrawal through the Gebel (14-18 November)

Schizzo n. 8

IL RIPIEGAMENTO DELL'ACIT ATTRAVERSO IL GEBEL
(14-18 novembre)



to continue the retrograde movement of the large part (XX Corp and DAK) for the entire November 15, always under the static protection of the 90th Light. More mobile units were entrusted with the creation of a safety corridor: the 3rd Recon Bn. at Soluch, the 33rd at Sceleidima, the Menton KG at Ajdabiya. This time the shift took place with some difficulty, for operational reasons, but not for lack of supplies; However obstructions had no major consequences and the new location was modified during the 16th and 17th.

The 16th, indeed, it was characterized by torrential rains that both opponents found it impossible to move. The 17th the 4th Light Arm. Bd. made contact with the 90th Light, but von Sponeck pulled away quickly and road demolitions and mined stretches would dramatically slow the British. In any case, that evening, at 19:30, Rommel decided to take the penultimate step back. Concerned about the persistent fuel shortages and alarmed by the threat posed by the reported presence of the 11th *Hussars* and the *Royals* to the east of Msus, he saw fit not to linger to gather the army between Benghazi and Ajdabiya.

Strictly speaking, the situation did not present itself as really serious, the British mass being to more than 200 kilometers away and the British armored cars finding a strong obstacle in the ground made marshy by rain right in the area of Msus. But Rommel, like Montgomery, did not intend to take any unnecessary risks. Moreover, he had received Cavallero formal guidelines:

"Duce ordered that defense of Tripoli needs to be done on line Marsa el-Brega Agheila-Marada. I confirm therefore need to gain as much time as possible to concretize the line organization (...)"

and news about the orders given to Bastico to oversee the many needs associated with the preparation, pending the arrival of the ACIT ⁽⁶¹⁾.

Rommel agreed on the convenience to put up a serious break water in the pursuit, in fact, not only was there a long time oriented, but had sent to Marsa el-Brega Gen. Lungershausen, commander of the 164th Light. Did not share other aspects of the operational solution. First of all he was convinced of the futility of prolonging the war in North Africa, then evil accepted the emphasis and the peremptory order of defense to the bitter end:

"It would have been better – he commented bitterly-that, with the same zeal that demanded from us, Marshal Cavallero was worried before the battle in front of El Alamein, the supply of the armored army. We had always done our duty and the value of the troops had been able to master difficult situations which far exceeded those of the problem of supplies. It would have been better that the upper echelons had asked themselves the use of energy that is required of us as a norm "⁽⁶²⁾.

The outburst regards both the High Commands, Italian and German, but it was deep in the belief that Rommel the Comando Supremo lacked the energy needed to overcome the tough too many shortcomings emerged in the logistic organization in the broadest sense.

It was in that state of mind that the commander of the ACIT sent to Rome a short report on the consistency of the army. He was anxious to give an exact feeling of the moment. The fighting spirit of the troops, he wrote, was intact, but they were reduced to a weak German division, three divisions of infantry and one Italian armored stressed the lower structural efficiency of the Italian large units respective to the German, but could have pointed out that they were even far from the organic level. By contrast, the enemy was under attack within two to three weeks the position of Marsa el-Brega with two armored divisions and four motorized. Not only that but, without much exaggeration, the entire army was living hand to mouth. Definitely:

"Given the diminished our strength and more than serious supply situation, the position of Marsa el-Brega, which is mined only poorly and lacks natural protection of the flanks, can be defended against an attack by enemy forces only if relevant :

- a) arrive soon anti-tank weapons, tanks and cannons with abundant ammunition required by dispatch of the Army of 16 November;
- b) they are immediately improved radically situations ammunition and fuel. This is possible but only through the use immediately and without savings, largely, of ships and equipment;
- c) it is significantly reinforced our aviation" ⁽⁶³⁾.

That it was necessary an appropriate intervention by Italy and Germany appeared prerequisite also Bastico, who, a few days before, in a brief to the Comando Supremo about the deployment in progress, he concluded: *"The in flow from the east gives limited reliance valid contributions. The entire situation in the east then all the more precarious. Urgent measures consistent exception in strength aviation assignments, as already telegraphed, & armored means' "*(64). The answer of Mussolini touched the top of the rhetoric:

"I have read of your 19131 today. Measures reported respond well to current needs especially if taken at the end with due diligence. In difficult now to remember all who desire & faith of the Heads it is of decisive importance that no serious situation if the Head I do not think so. Since forces in inflow can & must take much. It is known that the enemy in the east & in crisis is advancing so far with little strength. From the motherland will be sent everything possible to strengthen the line established which must, I repeat, is must hold at all costs if you want, if we want to keep Tripoli. I'm counting on you, dear Marshal Bastico, & sure that the victor of Santander will, as always, up to the task " ⁽⁶⁵⁾.

The victor of Santander knew exactly what the whole story of war in North Africa was at a turning point but, while

was more than willing to deal with the circumstances, whatever they were, much less felt inclined to tolerate even frictions in the past supported *pro bono pacis**. There was, in fact, a delicate problem: that of the commander of the ACIT. The matter had been discussed between Cavallero and Bastico and these of the 13th had followed the conversation with the formal request for a *high level* general, particularly qualified to assume the conduct of operations on the Cyrenaican front: Gen. Roatta, in his opinion, he replied in full to the task⁽⁶⁶⁾. Mussolini, on the current issue, the proposal is not shared at all, if only for political reasons. Deemed not necessary to send a "corps" general (likely typo for *army*), since Rommel retained command of the ACIT and would pass to the employment of the senior commander when he arrived at Marsa el-Brega⁽⁶⁷⁾.

Now Bastico put pen to paper with Cavallero:

“(...) When I have you verbally announced [the takeover of the command of all troops in Libya], I felt the need to expose my thoughts towards the Marshal Rommel, during the period in which it was under me, not only he had never obeyed, but had also taken against me a disciplinary form not always correct; I had judged, and judge still, brave soldier but in the absence of many of the qualities necessary to a commander in chief; and now, through no fault of his own, he has lost no small part of the personal influence which could also compensate for the lack of sympathy and affection aroused among our juniors; and represent you, as a result, the need to replace it with another commander more understanding and, above all, more willing to obey orders.

In this connection he alluded that the possibility of a suitable replacement was not to be excluded, but that precisely for this was not the case of tense, at least for the moment, in a principled opposition. And I fully agreed. But today, with the confirmation that the Marshal Rommel will retain command of the ACIT and that therefore I wished replacement is excluded, a duty of loyalty requires me to submit to your enlightened consideration the delicate situation of a commander who, apart any judgment on the professional qualities of an employee, even at the highest level, can not rely either on his obedience and even about his camaraderie and devoted collaboration (...)”⁽⁶⁸⁾.

The letter did not answer.

The fuel crisis still received a tightening abandonment of Benghazi. The 15th since it began the evacuation of equipment of the fort, continued uninterrupted in the following days; Wherefore the morning of the 18th arrived some destroyers loaded with fuel unfortunately they had to be diverted. In the same morning, then, it was spotted a British convoy of fifteen ships at sea north-east of Derna. The supposition of a landing in Benghazi led the commander of the fort let remove at once several barges carrying tanks and other materials, and to kick off the destruction and without use of port facilities and equipment for loading and unloading. The barges, shortly after leaving the port, were sunk and very few managed to save their cargoes.

*Latin = for the sake of peace or for the good of peace

Everything made Rommel greatly ill, who saw the DAK still immobilized:

"The Italian Intendenza seemed prey to a mania for destruction. Deposits of ammunition and water tanks were blown up, while we had still urgent need to supply the fighting troops. At the last moment he could prevent the destruction of electrical workshops and tanks in Benghazi " ⁽⁶⁹⁾.

Even Kesselring complained to Cavallero of the excessive advance of the eviction of Benghazi and attributed the problem to "uncertainty Command". In fact, the commander of the fort of Benghazi had been employed by Delease until midnight of the 15th. Then, rightly, ACIT took over to harmonize the abandonment of the city with the needs of the retreat. Evidently the detachments were many, especially in the logistics sector. Kesselring expressed to Cavallero their dissatisfaction:

"(...) Rommel, after reporting that held Benghazi until the 16th, now says he will it keep up to the 18th. There is a lot of uncertainty in these dates, there must be a single command responsible for giving the orders: Bastico or Rommel. No matter who it is Italian or German."

Kesselring was right, and it is not clear why the issue of Delease was adjusted so sudden and confusingly. Fact is that while Bastico announced to all the restoration of his full control action, and Barbasetti said goodbye to all that communicating from zero hours of the 16th Delease ceased to function, the evening of the 17th (that is, after the conversation with Kesselring) Cavallero addressed Bastico in these terms:

"I renew a pressing invitation to provide by any means fuel to the armored army. Delease, although your dependences, it takes action to this end. Delease aware that his task will not be exhausted until the armored army is behind el-Agheila" ⁽⁷⁰⁾.

However, the order of destruction of the port facilities in Benghazi was imparted by Rommel at 10:00 of 18 November. On the issue gasoline, Kesselring expressed concern and irritation. Despite being hit by Hitler with the total responsibility for the Tunisian front, he felt a moral obligation to continue to follow closely the vicissitudes of the ACIT. On the other hand he was not limited only to the extent of the aircraft, but also in the fact that this logistical challenge, but powerless to resolve the crisis, was delaying all other movements of personnel and weapons: the 95% of his airplanes worked for the ground forces. He attributed the current difficult situation to the *Oberquartiermeister* of the ACIT, who had conveniently timed the moves and now asked the OBS that these efforts could not have materially support.

Also according to von Rintelen the first committed a serious

complications was the Command of the ACIT, that "*does not give orders.*" In such an observation is added immediately allegations of Cavallero and of Kesselring: "*I agree - the first intervened – and I point out that does not connect*" and "*It's impossible to talk to Rommel - he urged the second - you never know where he is!*"⁽⁷¹⁾. Nevertheless, the withdrawal was going well and by the 19th what remained of the ACIT gathered in the area of Ajdabiya without a drop of gasoline (sketch No. 9).

Meanwhile, the column coming from the oasis of Siwa, Giarabub and Gialo was the procession, continuing to Marsa el-Brega. In this regard it should be a step back. At the beginning of the battle of El Alamein, the sector Siwa-Giarabub was garrisoned by the *Giovani Fascisti* Arm. Div.⁽⁷²⁾, who had concentrated in the oasis of Siwa the bulk of its forces (two battalions and three groups of motorized guns) and pushed on to Qara, on the western edge of the Qattara Depression, a detachment, a company formed by the II Battalion and the German 3rd Recon. Bn. Furthermore, in the Giarabub was located the IX independent battalion reinforced by a group of motorized guns the *Giovani Fascisti*. In Ras Qattara, about two hundred kilometers north-east of Siwa, was the IV Libyan battalion, but under the control of the Menton KG.

The *Giovani Fascisti* (Gen. Nisio) depended for use by the ACIT; for the logistics depended on Deleaze. It remained virtually unaware of the events on the front of El Alamein. The only received the order by the ACIT, and executed on the morning of 28 October, was to reinforce the detachment of Qara to eliminate a British column reported along the edge of the Qattara Depression that later proved nonexistent.

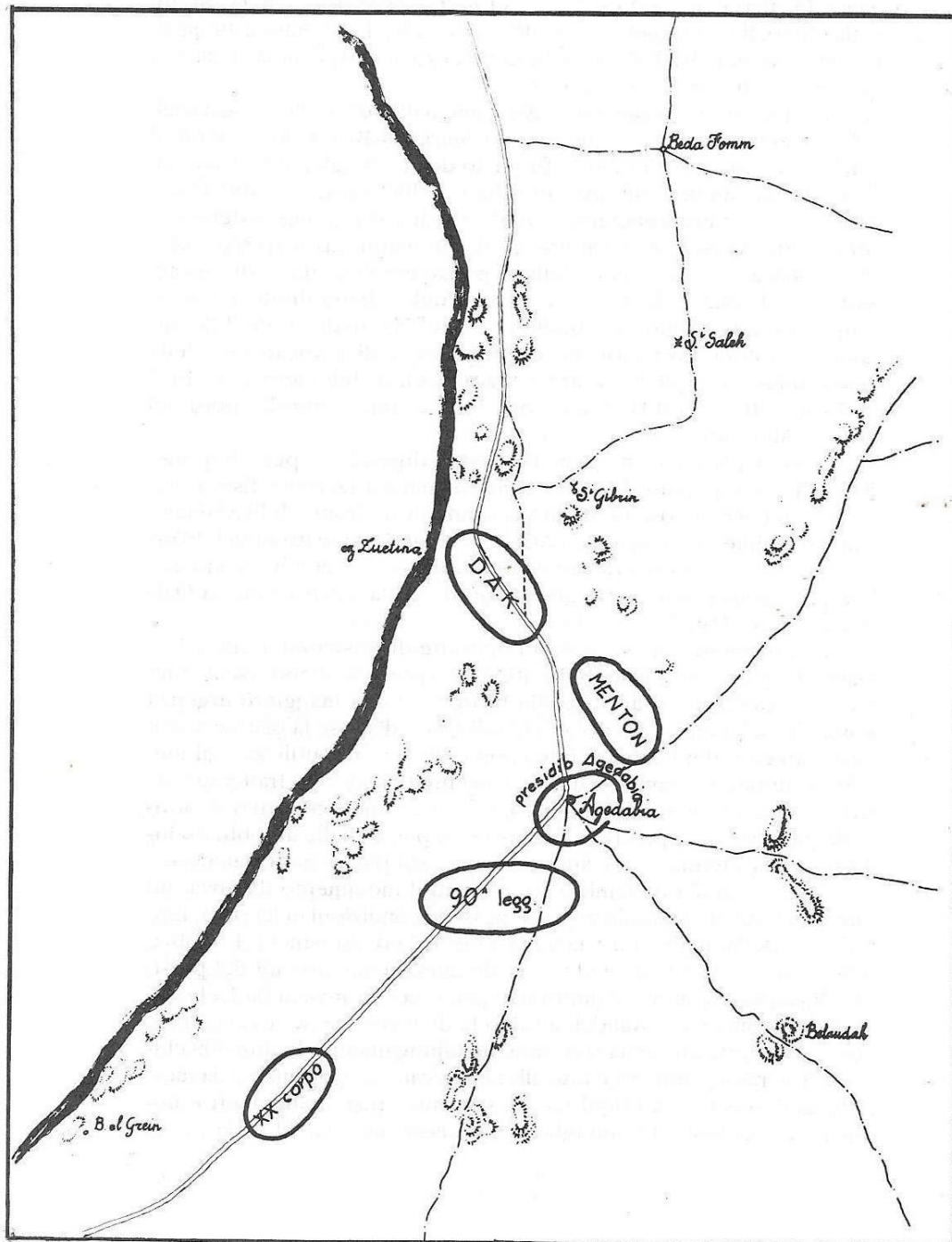
On November 6 the Gen. Nisio received provisions through Deleaze, to fall back on Giarabub, withdraw the garrison and take all to Sidi Omar. Proceeded to the task with the greatest urgency possible: called the detachment of Qara, ordered the destruction or burial of the transported materials, he tried to use the best trucks, including twenty inefficient. Meanwhile arrived in Siwa the IV Libyan Battalion, whose commander, without orders from the Menton KG and showy overtaken by British armored cars, had seen fit to fall back on the nearest Command.

On 8 November at 05:30 began moving from Siwa, a movement very troubled by the poor condition of the track, long stretches of which were covered by extensive and high sand banks, and for having to load in some way also the 400 men of the Giarabub garrison not reached by the truck column dispatched by Deleaze. If the diversion of Ajdabiya saved the division, however the difficulties poses really formidable to overcome: a stretch of over 400 kilometers of track and prohibitive until then practiced simply by special light means. However, with many adaptations and despite a persistent strafing by aircraft, on the evening of the 16th the first

The deployment of the ACIT at Ajdabiya (November 19)

Schizzo n. 9

LO SCHIERAMENTO DELL'ACIT AD AGEDABIA
(19 novembre)



part of *Giovani Fascisti* touched Ajdabiya and the second showed up on the evening of the 18th.

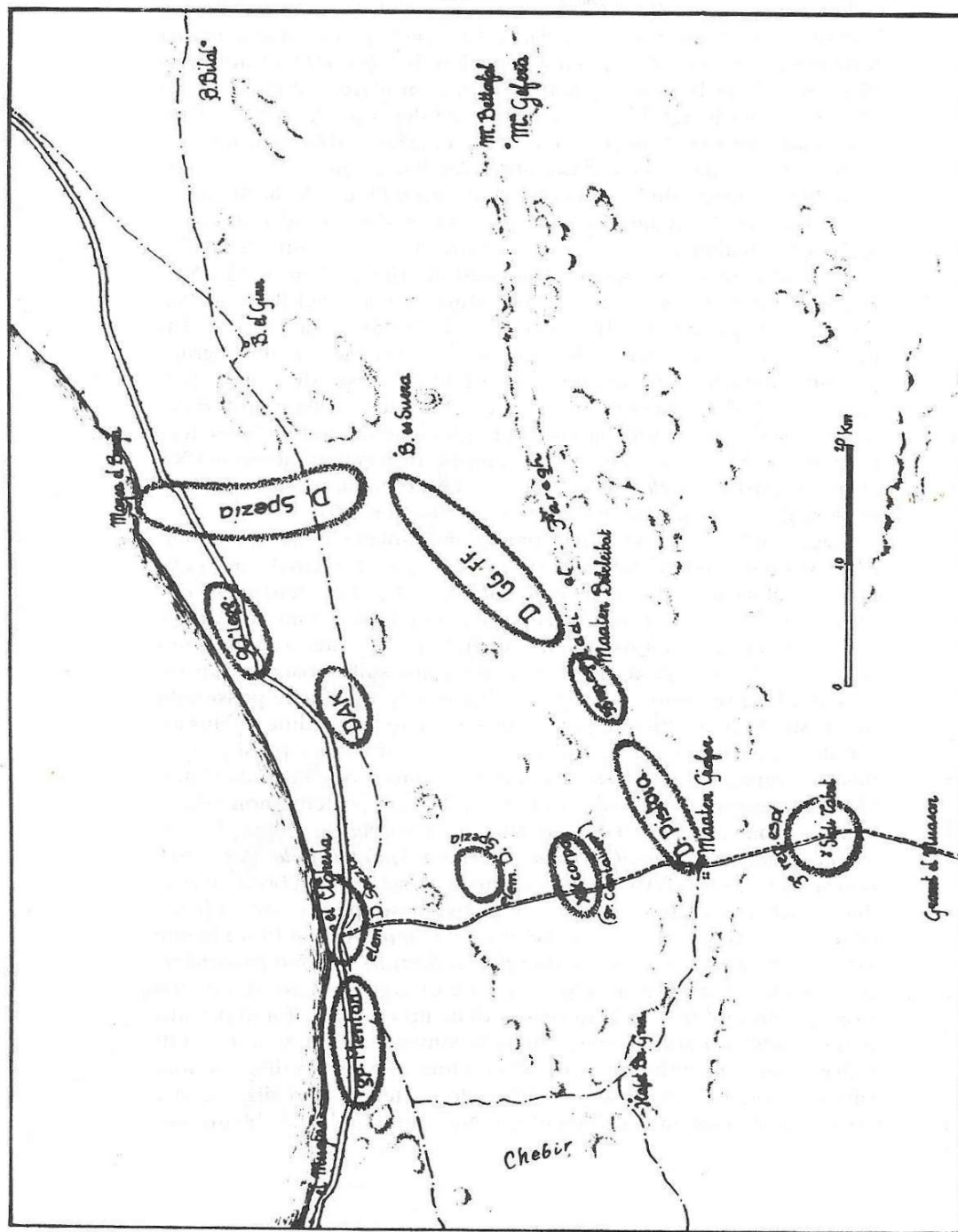
Montgomery knew what the problem of petrol ailed Rommel, because in a *Enigma* message early of the 16th, addressed the OKW, the commander of the ACIT had painted "catastrophic" situation and said the army practically immobilized in Benghazi. But the stresses to Lumsden proceeding at full speed to cut the road to the enemy did not lead to much, since even for armored cars driving in the desert was exhausting. On the 19th the 11th Hussars entered Soluch and Ghemines, both abandoned, and the *Royals* paused a little to the east of Antelat, the defense held by tanks. The 20th a column of the 4th Light Arm. Bd. made entry into Benghazi.

The appearance of armored elements in Giof el-Matar and el-Haseiat, namely the height of Ajdabiya, not overly alarmed the ACIT, however, caused her to make the final act of withdrawal ⁽⁷³⁾. On the day of the 24th the deployment of the army from Marsa el-Brega to Maaten Giofer was improved. The semicircle of defenses that had been entrusted to the divisions *Spezia*, *Giovani Fascisti* and *Pistoia*, with the 33rd Recon. Bn. at the node tracks of Maaten Belcleibat, and 3rd Recon. Bn. south of Maaten Giofer to protect the right flank. On the rear is arranged the mobile elements: the 90th Light and DAK in the central area, the battle group of the XX Corp north of the *Pistoia* and the Menton KG with the 580th Recon. Bn. west of el-Agheila (sketch n. 10) .

During the last phase of the withdrawal, the undoubted extreme seriousness of the situation continued to be considered the main military leaders with very different assessments. On the 17th Cavallero had met the leaders of the G.S. of the armed force (Gen. Ambrosio, Adm. Riccardi and Gen. Fougier) and the Secretary of State for War (Gen. Scuero). Of course the question was focused on the position of el-Agheila, recognized only able to grant some possibility of arrest. But Ambrosio, unimpressed by the order of Mussolini to resist in place at all costs, he asked what purpose were proposed to be achieved by this resistance. Cavallero said that el-Agheila was to be held to the bitter end because in the West there was no alternative and that "*in the worst and most desperate cases, any loss of Libya should be delayed as much as possible*". Ambrosio was not content: considered the possibility, even theoretical, losing Libya, had to consider whether to agree to still send forces overseas. Cavallero admitted that it was "*manifested in the external environment opinion about the futility of reinforcements being launched*", but stopped the debate with a series of arguments, objectively not unfounded: the need to make every effort to prevent the occurrence of similar misfortune; the convenience of a minimum of reinforcements to allow all of the ACIT least a reorganization stop; the possibility, provided by a simple calculation of the times, to achieve a position of resistance sufficiently valid. Furthermore, the abandonment

The deployment of the ACIT to el Agheila (24 November)

LO SCHIERAMENTO DELL'ACIT AD EL-AGHEILA
(24 novembre)



purely and simply of Tripoli would lead immediately the Italian-German army to the line of *Chotts* Tunisians, creating a deplorable "citadel of capitulation."

Moreover, the Comando Supremo and OKW were landing troops in Tunisia and, if on the one hand the renunciation to defend Sirtica and the consequent prompt retreat to the west would have prevented the formation of a Tunisian front, the other the failure to create this front Tunisia, on the other the failure to set this western front would make it impossible to stay in el-Agheila. The existence of the two sides would then depended on the ability to keep them far away from each other. Otherwise the dual concentric offensive would make vain all hope of fighting. The speech was presented with undoubted efficacy. Ultimately, now Cavallero is cautious: no resistance to the bitter end, but a resistance for as long as possible.

On the question it influenced the relationship of the air forces in Libya. Bastico had reported the consistency of the 5th Air Fleet: sixty MC 202 fighters and a dozen Cant Z 1007 efficient, only equipment capable of countering enemy aircraft. There was also a significant number of Cr 42 and MC 200 but, not being able to act without adequate fighter escort, were *"more than anything else, used dead weight, that crowed the few & little suitable & ill-equipped fields of Sirtica, attracting enemy aerial offenses"*. Therefore, he required a substantial modern reinforcement or a corresponding German aid, as an *"irreplaceable prerequisite resistance positions Agheila"*.

Cavallero had found no better than to turn to Kesselring, just who, in conversations of those days, he admitted sadly that the availability of *Fliegerfuhrer Afrika* was about 70-80 efficient modern aircraft and that, by contrast, they were by radio interceptions indicate the presence of about 300 fighters and 150 bombers of the *Royal Air Force* on the fields between Sidi Barrani and Tobruk, with the expectation of a future increase. Leveraging on the intention expressed by Kesselring to put a number of modern Luftwaffe units in Libya, Cavallero passed the request Bastico: three fighter groups, four squadrons of assault, four *Stuka* and a number of light bombers. As soon as possible, gradually, the R. Aeronautica would try to provide directly. *"Without that - he wrote - not only Libya would be mortally threatened, but would be even compromise the result of the efforts that the Axis was doing in Tunisia"* ⁽⁷⁴⁾.

Rommel continued to attempt to escape from the constraints put on him from above. He also admitted favorable position, thanks to the land mainly marshy, punctuated by vast salt marshes and extensive mudflats. Circumvention attempted by an opponent from the East would have resulted in a wide move and therefore exposed to counter-maneuver. But to make a parry like that it was necessary

a massive armor sufficiently supplied with fuel and ammunition, and especially so strong that it can operate with any chance of success.

On 20 November Rommel ran from Ajdabiya to Marsa el-Brega. He shuddered because his report to the Comando Supremo had not yet resulted in an answer ⁽⁷⁵⁾ and the arrangement being confirmed him in skepticism ⁽⁷⁶⁾. Nuanced view of the opportunity to discuss with Cavallero, he decided to go over his head. He called De Stefanis. He had been associated with excellence in terms of intellectual and as commander of the army corps, and he thought he knew how to illustrate very well the circumstances and prospects to Mussolini himself. Then he invited him to leave at once by plane for Rome. Then he went to see Navarini and if needed moral support he found: Navarini also believed that accepting battle in those conditions would translate into pure and simple destruction of his infantry.

In Rome, the mission of De Stefanis seems to have been announced by von Rintelen at 19:30 of the 20th. Cavallero said:

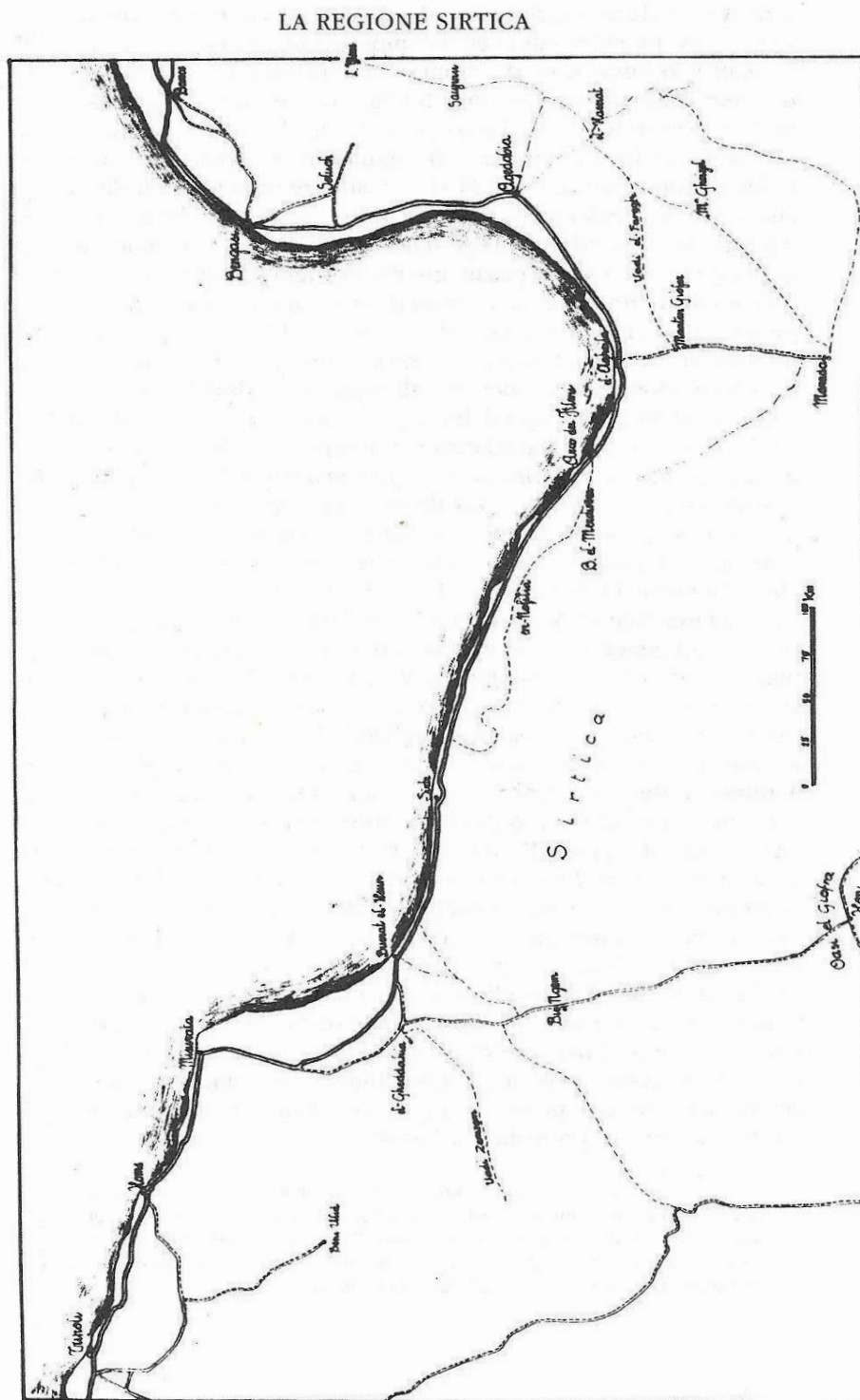
"I know he will propose to the retreat in the name of Rommel and I will react. I remember when I gave orders to resist Rommel at El Alamein, was already in my mind the idea of retreat. But now, even if you think the withdraw, it must keep quiet about it and arrange transportation"⁽⁷⁷⁾.

The opportunity to hide behind the subordinates predicting a retreat seems very much alive in the Cavallero. In the afternoon of the following day, during a meeting of generals of the army, came to Rome for the meeting of the Committee of progress, Geloso said in a defense more or less up to Misurata, was kept in mind, but "*you should not say to avoid repeating withdraw oriented mentality*" ⁽⁷⁸⁾. In truth, certain reticence in this high level appears very questionable.

At the dawn of the 21st came to the Comando Supremo a dispatch of Mancinelli warning that the mission De Stefanis and its purposes. Essentially Rommel, he anticipated, proposed not resist at Marsa el-Brega Marada with the *Sirtican* desert behind, but certainly to transfer the infantry at the height of Buerat el-Hsum leaving the a few motorized units at El Agheila, more than enough to compel the enemy to mount an attack. If you were dealt a decisive battle in place, he would hardly be able to save the infantry in a retreat under pressure from British (sketch n. 11).

Mancinelli also wanted to add his own personal opinion. The assessment of Rommel remarked, was based on appraisals undoubtedly realistic, but perhaps did not take adequate account of the time factor. The first enemy attack would be launched by a couple of armored divisions, not intact because of the long chase, and to reject such shock seemed sufficient Axis forces in site. The second, more systematic, attack would have required a considerable organizational period, presumably not

Schizzo n. 11



less than one month. It was therefore necessary to assess which substance would reach the ACIT within that period of time. Keep in mind that for the bulk of German stragglers there was little hope without a convenient reordering and full reintegration of heavy weapons.

The operations office of the Comando Supremo prepared a note for comment, after all sharing the observations of Mancinelli. The final opinion was as follows: last as long as possible on the line Marsa el-Brega Marada and reorganize in the immediate rear his mechanized forces of the ACIT; replenish while further back, also Buerat, the make shift elements are in need of major reorganization and so on unusable on the positions el-Agheila; when it deemed necessary, to move gradually to Buerat the infantry, replacing them with el-Agheila with mobile forces; while the withdraw of the troops of the Libyan Sahara; begin as soon as the work on the arrangement of the line of *Chotts*, in Tunisia, which guarantee extreme. It was also overshadowed hope to regain the initiative, albeit in limited range, in order to inflict losses on the 8th Army and thus delay any further and extreme retreat on *Chotts*. Cavallero noted in pencil: *"Everything, in short, depends on the solution of the transport problem, a problem which is at the moment dedicated all our energy. We have to hold the position of el-Agheila a while. For how long? You will see"*, and in these terms related to Mussolini (11:30) and the King (15:30).

Later, at 18:30, he received De Stefanis. He listened to the careful exposition of the general note of rest because already anticipated, as we know, in broad terms by Mancinelli, and was explicit reply: he would never allow a too rapid retreat to *Chotts* and, on the other hand, meant that the line Marsa Breda el-Marada was preserved *"as much as possible, even if you have no hope of keeping it indefinitely."* Move back to Buerat would lose a week, with injury to the strengthening of the Tunisian front. And then, where he wanted to be stranded Rommel? De Stefanis said he was driven to fall back on successive lines of resistance, *"but I do not know where he wants to go, and even spoke of capitulation. He is very down."* What goals Rommel aimed with his retreat? He urged Cavallero. De Stefanis confessed that he had some answers.

In the evening, while Cavallero was with Mussolini, came an encrypted message from Bastico, to comment on the communication of Mancinelli, received for information. Apart from the refusal to believe Buerat acceptable hypothesis - that afforded no support tactical, it was not organized in any way and would have caused serious consequences of various types - expressed a formal protest to the episode itself:

"(...) I can not help but notice that sent General De Stefanis, done in order to create to me absolutely impossible to have information on the nature of the mission received &, while I had already asked interview with Marshal Rommel, constitutes a new act that I consider at least little considerate not so much to myself as to the degree & the office that covers "⁽⁷⁹⁾.

He was absolutely right and the facts showed that Rommel could rightly be considered an difficult subordinate. But Cavallero would certainly not be replaced with an Italian general, even for the justified fear of seeing disappear German reinforcements for Tripoli; nor he would have asked the head OKW. And then, let us say, for all the fighters of Africa - including English-if there was a commander able to get some results this was Rommel, even with all his flaws!

The mission of De Stefanis closed as was to be expected. Cavallero received him again at 12:20 on the 22nd and hit him flatly rejecting proposals of Rommel because "*after all that has been done to strike up a position, you have to keep.*" But as for himself, De Stefanis, warned him "*not to make it the opinion of Rommel*".

Rome really not blowing fresh air to the chief of the Italian-German army. Kesselring, made aware of the incident that evening, in a conversation that lasted from 22:00 to midnight, spoke rather critically. According to information provided by the ACIT, at Antelat (50 kilometers north-east of Ajdabiya) there were more than forty British tanks and in the Msus (about 120 kilometers north-east of Ajdabiya) were 500 -600 vehicles, many of which probably of the services. Even accepting the evaluation indicated that the from Mancinelli the advanced enemy echelon would include a pair of motorized brigades, an advancing along the coast and the other from the desert, the ACIT must still be able to engage in combat and fight, albeit with limited objectives. In 1941 with just 40 *Panzer* Rommel had beaten a brigade and a half, Kesselring recalled and emphasized that "*when the enemy comes up with a small force, the defense become offensive and regained the initiative.*"

In conclusion Cavallero, Kesselring and von Rintelen agreed on the convenience to make the most of the line-and Agheila, since there were the time and the opportunity to make you rush reinforcements. Once again, the problem was reduced to a matter of reinforcements and transport.

Except that ... in the early hours of the 23rd arrived at the Comando Supremo message of Bastico with the summary of the interview just had with Rommel and with a considerable softening of the idea of stiffening the threshold of the Sirtica. The commander of the ACIT, who did not hide that he had received Keitel's communications of full consent of Hitler to the defense of Tripoli on line el-Agheila and insurance consistent supplies of men and material, had made the calculation of the available forces proving illusory thinking of serious resistance, especially in the impossibility of deploying extensive minefields. The cornerstones were close to each other two or three kilometers, only those in the coastal sector had a thin protective layer of barbed wire and minefield, no support in place, artillery mostly small caliber, sixty worn *Panzer*

and qualitatively inferior to the *Grant*, poor equipment, a supply line from Tripoli 800 km long that was all. In his view, accepting battle was tantamount to the destruction of the army. The line of Buerat would have forced however, the opponent to pass the Sirtican desert, keeping a stride of the Via Balbi which could be intensely beaten by Axis aviation. All of this probably would have allowed to earn three weeks for the arrival of reinforcements, except that it was not a solution, but simply "*prolong our lives. With what we have left, we can not save Tripolitania*".⁽⁸⁰⁾

Bastico concluded his brief report with some considerations:

"(...) Line & Rommel's arguments are undoubtedly solid; My objections were those I represented with 01/19393/Op. To come at a conclusion, however, you need to know the real possibility & it is time influx reinforcement aviation, troops, transport & fuel. So far have arrived very few. Also you need to know the situation that is leading into Tunisia & the amount there are of the forces & that will flow. Because if Tunisia is not kept solidly & do not get reinforcements, it might as well fight to the last at Agheila, instead Buerat. Marshal Rommel also expressed the need to be aware at what is happening in Tunisia. Finally Marshal Rommel has asked me to tell you that he strongly desires to confer with you as soon as possible, given that in the current it is urgent decisions, especially if they agree with his point of view".⁽⁸¹⁾

Clarification had become necessary and urgent. Basically, all the military leaders recognized the need to prevent the ACIT being forced to accept battle. The difference in operational vision lay in the fact that Kesselring and Cavallero, comforted by the opinion of the leaders of General Staff and the Italian army leaders, intended to remain at El Agheila as long as the enemy had not been deployed for the attack, while Rommel considered this attitude too dangerous and compromising the purpose of the withdrawal of Buerat. For all it was to gain time. Bastico, initially agreed with Kesselring and Cavallero, however, had begun to doubt the extent and timeliness of supplies from Italy⁽⁸²⁾.

In the late afternoon of the 22nd Cavallero arrived in Homs, accompanied by von Rintelen. Kesselring arrived on his own. The meeting was held at the German airfield at the Arc of Fileni, the morning of the 24th. Were present Cavallero, Bastico, Bernasconi, De Stefanis and Giglioli for the Italian; Kesselring, von Rintelen, Seidemann (the *Fliegerfubrer Afrika*) and Col. Westphal (Chief of Staff of the ACIT) for the German. Rommel took the word to sum up the troubled events of the army at the Battle of El Alamein and the retreat on the successive positions of Fuka, Matruh, Halfaya, Tobruk and Ajdabiya. The situation on the line Marsa el-Brega Marada was known. The first attack was launched by the enemy presumably with the 2nd New Zealand on the coastal strip and the 7th Armored Division in the wilderness, he hoped to stop him, but the fight would

It was very hard. Indeed, a British force superior than expected would make impossible the resistance. However, between two to three weeks was to be expected a tremendous shock, led by two armored divisions and four motorized, with 400 tanks, 300 armored cars, 360 field and 48 heavy pieces. You could not count to receive within that short amount of time the complements, of weapons, tanks and required materials. Definitely:

"The army – he said - took everything to keep the front of Marsa Brega-Marada, but his forces are limited and you can not do anything if you accidentally break through the position. On the rear are almost unarmed troops.

If you will be employed on the above line, it will not be possible to organize any other defense to Tripoli. Orders had the Duce were to defend this position and it will be defended (...)"⁽⁸³⁾.

Kesselring challenged the arguments of Rommel and Cavallero supported him. Bastico not intervened, however, the act of taking leave from Cavallero, handed him a note in which he summarized the preconditions for pulling back on Buerat: if the Germans did not place at the disposal of Superlibia *at least* 500 trucks; if Axis aviation *in Libya* was not made strong enough to oppose with advantage to the RAF and to protect the retreat; if you could not count with certainty on a *long-term* strength of the Tunisian front, retreat would turn out almost certainly be a disaster from which nothing would be saved.

At 13:00 Cavallero and Kesselring departed by plane for Rome. Purposely had avoided the first to arrive at explicit conclusions, preferring to issue to Rome with the support of Mussolini and he also wanted to talk again of the matter with Kesselring, after a full review of the transportation plan overseas.

The 25th the two marshals met again. Kesselring showed the letter sent to the Führer with a clear and firm course of action: "(...) *with the current forces must be immediately carried out a decisive battle, and (...) does not have to wait for the enemy to attack our forces. We must at all the costs to get decisive results on the enemy before their few vanguard elements are reinforced* " ⁽⁸⁴⁾, and handed a telegram transmitted from the OKW. Even Hitler, of course taking into account the thought of Kesselring, a defensive stop was imposed:

"It is necessary first of all to maintain the position of el-Agheila. It can not for now predict whether this will be prolonged long, because it depends only by the influx of supplies to Tripoli. But it would be wrong to give up voluntarily to the position of el-Agheila; This would worsen the situation, because then we could no longer rely on a sufficient supply of Tripoli" ⁽⁸³⁾.

The guidelines prepared by Cavallero, although under a setting seemingly intransigent, indicated in fact a policy of compromise:

"I reported to the Duce as to the observations in the talks of the 24th current. Duce has: 1st Extend the possible arrest of Marsa Brega line kept in mind that rainy season is likely to be to our favor. 2nd As soon as the attack decidedly the enemy avant-garde presence to take back the initiative they decided to impose & arrest. 3rd To this end working closely with air power also from Crete, as agreed yesterday with Marshal Kesselring. At ensure reinforcing fighters both of the OBS and the Superaereo. 4th Withdraw on line Buerat can be considered only if an attack enemy forces is very prevalent as outlined. 5th The movement is to be expected in any particular & organized previously. This measure for prudential & confidentially (...). 6th Possible timing for the withdraw must be done in consultation with [= between] Marshal Rommel & Governor Libya & movement must be authorized by the latter. For our part, you will want to ask Duce permission except absolute urgency, in which case you can decide directly" ⁽⁸⁶⁾.

Bastico passed these directives to Rommel by attenuating the prescription to attack as soon as the British avant-garde and leaving freedom of decision. On this occasion confirmed the confidence of a work by good comrades to overcome the serious moment. Instead he had no confidence in the agreement called for, so much so that he felt the need to express their concerns to the Comando Supremo. Rommel looked really inclined to resist at el-Agheila as ordered, but given his known character, you could not rule out that at some point he decided to leave the positions on own the initiative. Therefore Bastico instructed the Command of the XX Corp to begin to prepare something at Buerat and to rebuild the Trieste in that area.

The constraint that no retrograde movement would have to make without authorization of the Comando Superiore provoked lively resentment by Rommel:

"(...) Your opinion that no withdrawal will be made without your prior order is inconsistent with the provisions had the minutes of 24/11 by Marshal Cavallero. Generally I stick now as before the orders had the Duce and the Führer, according to which the positions of Marsa el-Brega you must keep to the bitter end. Resistance on another line will be taken into account only when the front should fail as at Alamein, or so requires the development of the situation in Tunisia (...)."

Last sentence, very significant, followed an explicit warning that it was necessary to put Superlibia 500 vehicles available to XXI Corp *"if you do not want to meet the danger of leaving the bulk of these infantry divisions at the mercy of the enemy"* ⁽⁸⁷⁾.

Apart from the fact that nothing in the minutes is being imparted directly by Cavallero to Rommel on any subject, form is irritating and unfair. Bastico could not bear such a way to express themselves. He tried to limit friction talking about the issue with Mancinelli and asking him to intervene with the General Staff of the ACIT. ⁽⁸⁸⁾ However they cropped up too many misunderstandings. And even strange contradictions. In the belief that Rommel would abandon el-Agheila as soon as possible, conceptually

and psychologically oriented as he was to retreat to Buerat, Bastico bothered to outline a preventive, albeit embryonic organization of this line with the surviving elements of the *Trieste*, not just reordered. By contrast Rommel, although reluctant to stand el-Agheila, demanding the full and complete availability of efficient troops (including the *Trieste*) to defend positions that in his heart he had already decided to leave.

Bastico not know what to think. Cavallero signaled the deepening feeling that Rommel, notwithstanding any contrary order, had our minds turned to retreat even well to the west of Buerat ⁽⁸⁹⁾. He tried to suppress the negative influence resulting from such guidance, warning Navarini: *"I refer to your 7209 and 7212. Known tendency at retreating considered as inevitable. I wish that this trend ceases. Remember that orders of the Duce & mine are to stand on line Agheila"* ⁽⁹⁰⁾.

Eventually contacted Mancinelli again: *"Rommel demeanor towards resistance at Marsa Brega I can clear despite repeated talks. I beg you express your thinking about real intentions of Rommel (...)"* ⁽⁹¹⁾. The answer came prepared with comprehensive directness:

"(...) Circa the intentions of Rommel, he intends to resist at Marsa Brega & would take only under current threat being overwhelmed by superior forces or imperative under the new situation on the Tunisian front. I think Rommel will be affected because this Command reserves to order any withdrawal. He thinks that under enemy pressure pulse authorization would arrive too late and ...? ... He orders withdrawal must not imply distrust in the will to as long as possible to keep current positions.

Rommel says insistence contradicts verbal directives of Marshal Cavallero. As I mentioned verbally unfortunately, Rommel & his staff are the blackest pessimism. We do not believe that we can stop at Tunis & does not believe major reinforcements arrive anyway & he is convinced our inferiority material although reinforced facing more modern equipment & rich opponent. That assessment, which has undoubted bases realistic assessment material situation, is probably influenced & made more severe by the human tendency of the army commander find only material factor reason in his defeat.

However resulting intimate persuasion impossibility effective resistance & presents question whether under such conditions Rommel can remain to command the army, which will certainly their duty to the great soldier that is, without soul and without faith. It is likely that army command has in the study also measures to save what can be saved in case of impossibility resistance & Rommel solicitous to the Führer's directives for this extreme case (...)" ⁽⁹²⁾.

In the early afternoon, while the heavy dispatch of Mancinelli was studied at the Comando Superiore, came a message from the ACIT. Bastico when white:

"I can tell you - Rommel wrote - that I feel obligated to confer personally with the Führer, supreme commander of the German forces, on the situation and supply of German troops of the armored army of Africa. Starting on the morning of 11/28/42, return within 1-2 days. Meanwhile, the general who took command of the armored troops was Fehn" ⁽⁹³⁾.

The thing was staggering. "*Only at this time (14:00 hours) - telegraphed immediately to Rome - (...) are informed that Marshal Rommel, without asking permission, left for Germany. I refrain from any comment*" ⁽⁹⁴⁾. But privately exploded:

"(...) The Marshal Rommel knows to be under me; his gesture is therefore an act of indiscipline and open to full disavowal of my authority as Commander Superior and Governor General. Made by any Italian general would lead them before the war crimes tribunal for abandonment of place in front of the enemy (...)" ⁽⁹⁵⁾.

Rommel not belonging to the Italian army, Bastico continued, and militating to his advantage obvious political considerations, was useless to ask any sanction against him. That being the case, it was necessary, however, an urgent review of the delicate situation created.

Cavallero, although I understand the indignation of Bastico for good reasons, did not want to complicate even more the tangled skein of the organization of command in Africa. Perhaps he feared that the request for exoneration of Rommel would not be accepted by Hitler, with severe scorn Italian; perhaps he felt that dig in their heels with the OKW could hurt the susceptibilities of the ally(!). The fact is that he commissioned Gen. Magli, of the Comando Supremo, to meet with Col. von Waldenburg, substitute for von Rintelen, and prospect the gravity of what happened. On his behalf, he spoke of the matter with Kesselring, who remarked: "*I do not understand how Rommel arrived at such a stupid decision*" ⁽⁹⁶⁾. A protest purely platonic. At whose expense in front of the ACIT was Bastico, was hit in prestige.

Around 15:00 of the same 28 November Rommel arrived at the airport in Rastenburg in East Prussia far away. The awaited Mar. Keitel, chief of the OKW, and in Gen. Jodl, chief of operations department, both extremely cautious and reserved. At 17:00 he was admitted to the conference room and the reception of the *Wolfsschanze* Hitler was tough: "*How dare he leave his command without my permission?*". Rommel described the tribulations of the army during the battle and retreat, and this was the only topic that received the approval of the Führer, who deigned to define unique and exemplary conduct of operations until then. But when Field Marshal illustrated deficiencies of the ACIT, the defects of the current position and the urgent and substantial need for replenishment, the atmosphere, already tense, escalated suddenly. Hitler challenged the weakness of the German troops, as losses roamed only on 15-20%; armament attributed the shortcomings to the fact that the soldiers had thrown away their weapons ; clearly showed to believe exaggerated or arising from the fault demands. Rommel, exacerbated by the unjust accusations, got heated and supported the need to consider the inevitable evacuation of Africa in more or less short-term and, therefore, the opportunity to save as much as possible of the army.

Access to a German Dunkirk "*had the effect of a spark in the powder keg*", noted Rommel. Hitler was struggling with the difficult situation on the Russian front, where the 6th Army and a part of the 4th Armored Army had been encircled at Stalingrad in those days, and psychologically refused to worry about the events of the North African theater, until then relatively quiet. Snapped angry and hit Rommel: even von Rundstedt and other generals would have liked to move back the previous winter and the crisis of that time was exceeded only because of his decision to stiffen the resistance on the spot. He never would have allowed the abandonment of Africa: there were political reasons that imposed the preservation of a bridgehead overseas, and alluded to the impact that such an act would result in Italy. Ultimately, there was no talk of leaving Tunisia and even Tripoli. Finally, being undeniable attrition of the ACIT, he agreed to sent to men, equipment, supplies, twenty pieces of new type 88 and a number of *Tiger* tanks. *Reichsmarschall* Goering, armed with full powers, was to accompany Rommel to Rome to deal with the matter with the Comando Supremo. It is worth pointing out that Hitler was careful not to move precise critical behavior of Rommel against the Comando Supremo and Bastico. Indeed, he turned to Mussolini with a letter pre-announced the arrival in Rome of the two personages, in which the main subjects were made up of a rebuke:

"I will be communicated at this time that the port of Tripoli is blocked for 14 days by several cargo ships for supplies and to evacuations. Until December 4 no ship for armored army he thinks can arrive at Tripoli (...)"

and an incentive to get busy:

"The Rommel's army has need for uninterrupted supply of materials and supplies (...). The materials are largely in southern Italy. It only navigate, especially to start the steamers had long intended to Tripoli and already loaded (...). Please therefore strongly, Duce, to do everything possible so that these difficulties can be overcome (...)" ⁽⁹⁷⁾.

The Adm. Riccardi said, very annoyed, along with a reminder intended to Mussolini. Replies point by point and summed up with a wealth of data the unfortunate situation at sea. He wanted and concluded bluntly:

"(...) its [the Royal Marina] chances decrease continuously and rhythm indicating the likelihood that soon may become inadequate to any task.

It is certain that from now on will no longer be possible to ensure the minimum supply to the armies of Africa, despite any sacrifice, if the Axis will not regain the prevalence air in the central Mediterranean, starting with the resumption of effective action and continues on the bases of Malta " ⁽⁹⁸⁾.

The journey of Goering and Rommel took nothing short of grotesque aspects:

"I was exasperated and offended by the lack of understanding shown by our High Command - Rommel wrote - and to a tendency to dump the blame for his own mistakes on the troops at the front. My anger redoubled when I witnessed the ridiculous attitude in its *Reichsmarschall* special train. The events did not seem to bother him in the least (...).

Throughout that time Goering was my own worst enemy. I think he is trying to torpedo us to carry out his plans in North Africa. He painted all the operational assessments that would send to the headquarters of the Führer as pure pessimism. It was he who sat around the absurd idea that I was subject to mood swings and [so] I could hold command only when things were going well"⁽⁹⁹⁾.

Although demoralized Rommel struggled in finding a solution which, while aiming to save the remains of the ACIT, could appear acceptable in the eyes of Hitler. Maybe there is a way out: retreat into Tunisia and stop the 8th Army on the Mareth line, prepared at the time by the French, at the Tunisian-Libyan border; reorder quickly the army due to the proximity of the ports of Tunis and Bizerte with Italy; put together, drawing on his armored forces and Gen. Nehring, commander of German troops in Tunisia, a mass capable of attacking and violently beating the inexperienced Americans in Algeria. Seen from this angle, the entire retreat would have acquired the significance of a clever move designed to enable a maneuver for internal lines.

To avoid a new confrontation with Goering, Rommel commissioned Leut. Berndt, his assistant, to go to the car of the *Reichsmarschall* and explain the proposed exaggerating the benefits. Berndt acquitted the task well because Goering actually ended up declaring convinced and promised to advocate it.

In Rome, the start was not promising. On arrival, in the afternoon of 30 November, they were received by Kesselring, who smiled ironically the idea of a sudden maneuver against the Americans, finding an excuse to leave Libya. In his view "*the end of November, reaching the throat of el-Agheila, was now averted any immediate danger to the army of Africa*"⁽¹⁰⁰⁾. It is unknown whether he openly voiced criticism of the commander of the ACIT, certainly did weigh the realization of a stronger threat of the British air bases Luftwaffe in Tunisia. He explained, in fact, that the danger posed by the Algerian - Malta-Tripoli triangle aside any advantage: then not even think of a further retreat of the ACIT. Goering was impressed by these arguments, so that Rommel gave to support his thesis.

Later Mussolini received the visitors at the Palazzo Venezia. It does not have traces of the meeting except a hint from the Cavallero diary: "*At 17:00 I go to confer with the Duce. It is in this part of the interview the RM Goering.*" But there was also Rommel, who gave a summary pretty clear on two subjects. The first concerned the unfortunate outcome of the decisive battle. Rommel wrote bitterly:

"In the conversation with the Duce, Goering declared that I had left the Italians in a crack at El Alamein. Before I could reply as befits such absurd claim, Mussolini said: *"This is new to me. Your retreat was a masterpiece, Marshal Rommel"* ⁽¹⁰¹⁾.

The second point concerned the defense of Tripoli. It seems that Mussolini has accepted without much dramatize preference for Rommel's Buerat line. In fact he decided to kick off, or better speed up the provision of the above positions, bringing immediately the non-motorized troops. The defense line of Marsa el-Brega Marada would instead continue as long as possible. This change of address is not found if not in the cards of Rommel, however, is endorsed by the conclusions presented by Cavallero the following day, at the end of the conference of military leaders.

The meeting was held at the Comando Supremo. They were present Cavallero, Riccardi and Fougier one hand; Goering, Kesselring, Rommel and von Pohl Weichold other. Goering spoke with some bombast painting the situation in enough rosy hues: for the first time the Axis was close to the battlefield (*"jump the panther"* he pointed out), resulting in ease of fueling the fighting troops; from France had obtained merchant ships for more than half a million tons with obvious positive effects in transport overseas; the occupation of southern France and Corsica allowed a final safety policy; Americans were closing on Bizerte, but Nehring had already been ordered to face them and beat them. As for the ACIT the situation was known. The Duce had decided that the position of Marsa el-Brega (in itself not the best, due to the scarcity of water and the weakness of the south side) was kept as much as possible. The defense Buerat (estimated position from the Führer preferable to the previous year) was to absolutely last until Tunisia had been upgraded and Algiers occupied. In this regard, the opportunity presented itself to repulse the enemy at Grano and point to Morocco ⁽¹⁰²⁾. Goering then launched into a series of considerations on the problem of maritime transport, the premise that *"both for Tunisia and for Rommel one thing is certain: if supplies continue with the rhythm made to date, we can not keep either Tunisia or Tripolitania"*.

The long exposure is not brought very concrete to pressing problem of rehabilitating the ACIT. Everyone was well aware of its urgency and its difficulties. Adm. Riccardi also intervened, as concerned the Royal Marina, and Gen. Raimondo, director superior of transport of the SMRE (Army G.S.), for movements rail. ⁽¹⁰³⁾ Cavallero was heard. Although optimistic, he certainly had heard the tirade of Goering with skepticism. At the end he showed the telegram prepared for Bastico:

"1. I authorize you start gradual withdrawal of the ACIT to the new positions established prior urges turnout necessary means of transport.

2. Mobile units must remain on site as long as possible not only to cover the movement of the infantry, but also to act offensively against advanced elements of the enemy (...).

6. (...) intensified first organization of the Buerat position until when will deal with Marshal Rommel, the position which, in full agreement between Duce & Fuhrer, ACIT must make permanent cessation & this in connection with operations of the Axis in Tunisia (...)" .
(104)

Reviewed the message, Cavallero turned to Rommel and emphasized that the withdrawal from Marsa el-Brega Marada was not to be premature.

All this validates the narrative of Rommel, who saw substantially accepted by the Supreme Commander's ideas, although formally disguised as some conditioning: yes to line Buerat, yes to the withdrawal of the infantry, so the protection of the retrograde movement by armored troops. The constraints related latter: reaction maneuvered against the enemy and conservation as long as possible of the current line. "*That was something*," said Rommel.

As a final note: not a word was spent by Cavallero addressed Rommel severely about the serious misconduct. Bastico would have well deserved such a stance.

But the commander of the ACIT had to deal especially with the compatriots. The next lunch at the Excelsior Goering's antagonism returned to the surface in the unpleasant form. The Mar. Milch, summoned urgently and arrived that morning from Berlin, wrote in his diary:

"During lunch Goering heavily attacked Rommel, with words very offensive. After, Rommel came to my room and for several hours I had to try to comfort him. But something inside him was broken, so that eventually he laid down his head on my shoulder and wept. He could not resign himself to the fact that Hitler had no confidence in his ability to command".
(105)

To complete the picture, Goering sent a report to the Führer obviously very heavy criticism, because Hitler, given a quick glance, he passed the message to Gen. Jodl noting: "*The Reichsmarschall said that Rommel has lost self-control*" (106).

NOTES TO CHAPTER I

- (1) Later Gen Ramcke had complained to Goering, from which the *Luftwaffenjaegerbrigade* depended, of being abandoned by Rommel no vehicles and no supplies.
- (2) Joseph Mancinelli, *Dal fronte in Africa settentrionale* (1942-1943), Rizzoli, Milan 1970, pp. 212-213.
- (3) Supreme Command Historical Diary (DSCS), tele 333BO / Op. On 11/04/1942, at 21:55, came to Rommel by Deleaze only in the late morning of the 5th.
- (4) DSCS, tele 33390 / Op. Date 11/05/1942, 13:00 hours.
- (5) Erwin Rommel, *Guerra senza odio*, Garzanti, Milan, 1959, p. 304. We prefer, usually refer to the English text edited by Liddell Hart, The Rommel Papers, because the cited Italian version has many omissions, so each of them a certain importance.
- (6) According to British sources, the 8th Arm. Bd., Reached Galal in advance of the Axis retreating column -in fact it was a huge serpentine track and roadway all the more heterogeneous - in ambush: "In a 'Now the column was almost destroyed,' were knocked out 29 Italians and 14 Germans tanks, four guns and 100 trucks. The soldiers were captured about a thousand. Later south it was found 11 tanks and other vehicles abandoned "" (Michael Carver, The , *La battaglia di El Alamein*, Baldini and Castoldi, Milan 1964, p. 314).
- (7) The good fortune of I/39th Inf. and the *Lupi di Toscana* Battalion had depended solely on the fact that the units in question had been placed at the time on the coast, west of Sidi Abdel Rahman, and therefore had time to fall back truck-mounted, protected by the 90th Light.
- (8) DS Deleaze, tele 5150 date 11/05/1942, 11.40 hours, decrypted at 12:15, the Gen. Mancinelli.
- (9) DS Deleaze, tele. 5151 date 11/05/1942, 12:15 of Gen. Mancinelli.
- (10) DS Deleaze, tele. 571 / Serv. On 11/05/1942, at 10:00, the X Corp Command. The telegram was received by the broadcasts center of Deleaze at 14:30, delivered to the body at 15:55 and sent back operations office at 17:30.
- (11) The special statement of Headquarters the Middle East, disclosed by Reuter, beginning with: "After 12 days and nights of incessant attacks by our ground and air forces, the Axis forces in the western desert are in full retreat. Their columns disorder are relentlessly attacked by our forces on land and by the R.A.F. by day and by night (...). "
- (12) "The Sollum-Halfaya line - Cavallero wrote in his diary - should become a fortress." According to Ciano, Mussolini was pale, the features his features drawn, tired, but hopefully in a possibility of stopping on the line of Fuka, while realizing the gravity of the situation. It was a vain hope, since "even Cavallero, the real culprit of all our illness, says instead that any attempt at resistance can be mentioned if not on-line Sollum Halfaya" (Galeazzo Ciano, *Diary* 1937-43, Rizzoli Milan 1980, p. 663). Apart from the fact that the real responsibility of the wars are always to be found in the political, the ill-will of the Foreign Minister is so obvious as to render superfluous a comment.
- (13) See. Mario Montanari, *Le operazioni in Africa settentrionale*, vol. III, El Alamein, chap. X, USME, Rome 1989.
- (14) Telephone call between Goering and Kesselring intercepted at 14:45 of 11/05/1942 (Cavallero *Diario*, same date).
- (15) Before leaving Fuka, Navarini sent the head operations office of the XXI Corp of Barbasetti to explain the situation of the corps. Arrived at Matruh in the early afternoon, the officer found a huge traffic jam at the entrance to a narrow corridor existing the deep minefield and only access to the roadway. Here *Feldgendarmarie* allowed the passage to only Germanic vehicles. The Italian, view it, made the pair: gathered a group of soldiers, weapons in hand, he put aside the Germans and gave the green light to Italian vehicles (Antonio Tedder, *Fiamme nel deserto*,

- Cisalpino, Milan, 1962, p. 402). It was not the only incident, but objectivity wants you precise possible cause of "selection", ie the intention of soon recover, the usable, mechanized forces (German).
- (16) You are not able to judge if by Deleaze would be possible, in practice, support in any way the desperate effort of the X Corp. It is more than likely, as rightly said Mancinelli, that in the state of general crisis, and as part of a complete surprise caused by the fact that the army was not to retreat, *no improvisation* would be feasible.
 - (17) Report of Gen. Gandin.
 - (18) Basil Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, Brace and Co., New York 1953, p. 361.
 - (19) Report of Gen. Barbasetti. Among other things, the bad news in the field of supplies kept coming. On November 6, in fact, following the British air raids in Benghazi and Tobruk, our fleet suffered further losses. In Benghazi they were sunk tankers *Portofino* and *Lombardi* and torching two minesweepers; Tobruk gone to the bottom the venerable steamer *Ethiopia* and a German landing craft and severely damaged the submarine *Sciesa*.
 - (20) DSCS, tele. 33429 / Op. date 11/06/1942, 20:45.
 - (21) I.S.O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, vol. IV, H.M.S.O., London 1966, p. 93.
 - (22) According to the report of the 7th Arm. Div., The British had taken or destroyed 15 tanks and 7 heavy field guns and captured 2,000 German prisoners.
 - (23) Cavallero *Diary* date 11/08/1942. *The resulting message sounded like this: "Duce, having read your last communication, asks me to insist on the necessity that resistance positions Sollum-Halfaya be prolonged as much as possible. Duce believes that where lacking such resistance would not only compromise the essential Cyrenaica evictions, but it would be put in doubt even the possibility of on-line defense to constitute at Agheila. Duce, while leaving you free to act, he desires that you keep in most of the above account. Cavallero"* (DSCS, tele. 33449 / Op. date 11/08/1942, 17:25 hours).
 - (24) DSCS, tele. 33453 / Op. date 11/08/1942, 23:50 hours: *"General Gandin told me today your communications & brought your greetings. I am sure that Italian-German Armored Army, overwhelmed in the material but morally invincible, under your strict control will block the passage to the enemy according final directives that the Duce has imparted. Ugo Cavallero. "But the aforementioned directives allowed "full freedom of action" to Rommel.*
 - (25) DS Deleaze, tele. 4808 / Sit. On 11/08/1942, 10:50 hours .
 - (26) DS Deleaze, tele. 4814 / Sit. date 11/08/1942, 11.55 hours.
 - (26) DS Deleaze, tele. 4814 / Sit. date 11/08/1942, hours 11.55.
 - (27) Cavallero *Diary* date 11/07/1942.
 - (28) *Ibid*, date 11/09/1942. The previous day had arrived in Tripoli seven ships there that morning arrived from Piraeus at Tobruk the *Foscolo* with 60 trucks, 15 tanks, 1,700 tons. of fuel and 800 tons. of various material.
 - (29) *Ibid*, date 11/07/1942.
 - (30). DSCS, f. 51077/Op. date 11/09/1942
 - (31) DSCS, tele. 33455 / Op. On 11/08/1942, 23:55.
 - (32) Report of Gen. Barbasetti.
 - (33) DS Deleaze, tele. R.119 date 11/08/1942, 07:35 hours of ACIT.
 - (34) B. Liddell Hart, op. cited above, p. 347.
 - (35) DS Deleaze, report of interview Barbasetti-Rommel, Attachment. 1.
 - (36) DS Deleaze, tele. 4881 / Sit., Date 11/09/1942, 21.15.
 - (37) DSCS, tele. 33465/Op. date 11/10/1942, 18:45 hours.
 - (38) DSCS, tele. 33461/Op. date 11/10/1942, 01:00 hours.
 - (39) Cavallero *Diary*, date 11/10/1942.
 - (40) Forces at the border under the command of Gen. Falugi consisted of: Headquarters of the *Pistoia* Mot. Div., I Fucilieri Battalion of the 35th Inf. with the and III weapons Battalion. and accompanying anti-tank; II Fucilieri Battalion of the 36th Inf. incomplete with; III/3rd Field Artillery. Also available the following units in reinforcement: II/336th Inf. *Piceno*, II/350th Inf. two companies in march,

running unincorporated, a group of 100/17, II/24th Grouped. Corps Artillery. The group also included 2nd/III Monferrato, a tank formation company of, a battery of semoventi that on the 10th passed to the XX Corp.

- (41) E. Rommel, op. cited above, p. 314.
 - (42) DS Deleaze, tele. 5165 dated 11/11/1942, 07:35 hours of Gen. Mancinelli. See. G. Mancinelli, op. cited above, p. 220.
 - (43) DSCS, tele. 11113 date 11/11/1942, 8.20 am, of the ACIT.
 - (44) F.H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, vol. HMSO, London 1981.
 - (45) Overall, the *Pistoia* lost 512 men among the dead, wounded and missing.
 - (46) The garrison consisted of: VII bersaglieri Battalion., III Battalion. S. Marco, V Libyan Battalion, III/350th Inf., a Battalion formation in arrival, XVIII Carabinieri Battalion, 2nd anti-aircraft artillery, 345th garrison of coast artillery and smaller units.
 - (47) When the Gen. Deindl, commander of the German rear, once again saw the Gen. Cassata at el-Agheila the evening of the 14th embraced him effusively declaring very sorry that he was forced to leave Tobruk in that way and in that moment.
 - (48) The battle group consisted of: Command *Ariete* Arm. Div.; recon unit (III armored car squadron *Monferrato* and remains of the *Nizza group*, two companies of 12th bersaglieri *Littorio*); 66th Inf. *Trieste* with two battalions of the two companies; a battery formation of three guns.
- The few tanks and remaining guns were inefficient, so were evicted to the rear area. Command XX Corp remained alive for monitoring and driving the combat group, in close collaboration with the DAK.
- (49) Bernard Montgomery, *Memoirs*, Collins, London 1958, p. 142.
 - (50) Historical Diary of the High Command Armed Forces Libya (DSCSFAL), dated 11/08/1942.
 - (51) DSCSFAL, date 11/12/1942. It should be added that about a week later, Bastico had to throw back in his face Cavallero's statement so categorical: "*It seems failed meeting at Medjez el Babr German diplomat Kahn with General Barre. Attitude troops, population, police [in Tunisia] decidedly hostile. This situation is substantially unlike that one proposed to me Your Excellency, that excluded my every concern facing west. I would like to kindly know, for my orientation, measures taken to deal with the situation in Tunisia and to ensure my rear flank that, as ordered, everything is projected towards the east*". Cavallero reported it to Mussolini without comment (Cavallero Diary, date 11/18/1942).
 - (52) About the initial recruitment of static defenses at el-Agheila by the *Spezia*, Cavallero specified that the German units in transit would pass the orders of the commander of the *La Spezia*. Needless to say, given the precedents, the value of such a provision was very doubtful.
 - (53) G. Mancinelli, op. cited above, p. 221. The telegram to Cavallero ("On the 13th of November from 13:00 visting Martuba at *Fliegerfuhrer*"), sent at 6:30 am the same day, arrived in the evening of the 14th at Deleaze.
 - (54) In fact, the Leut. Col. Revetria, chief information office Deleaze, had the opportunity to speak at length, the day of the 11th with Rommel with which, in essence, while recognizing the gravity of the situation of the Axis, had declared its intention to stop at el-Agheila not despairing to force the enemy to a halt (DSCSFAL, 19128 tele / Op. date 11/15/1942, 20:45, directed to the Supreme Commander).
 - (55) Of the meeting there are three reports: a "note" attached to the historic diary of Deleaze; a "verbal" real test (see. annex n. 2); a "report" detailed constituent evidently the first draft of the report, annexed to the Cavallero diary. The quotations in the text are taken from the "report".
 - (56) A note in pencil by Gen. Fassi, head of the G.S. of Deleaze, written the 8th at 14:00 at the end of the telegram to Cavallero Rommel says: "*S. E. Barbasetti, this morning before leaving by plane for Ajdabiya, said the interview may not will have more place and that Marshal Cavallero return this morning to Italy starting from Misurati*". The message Rommel, sent at 17:50 on the 14th, was delivered by hand by the German liaison officer in service with Deleaze at 02:45 of 15th. The response

- of Barbasetti was drawn up at 04:10 in the same morning (DS Deleaze, tele. SD / 252).
- (57) DS Deleaze, tele. 5055/Op. On 11/13/1942, at 19:00. The results of the visit of Cavallero does not seem to have been frowned upon by Mussolini. "The Duce (...) – reported by Ciano – he is annoyed with Cavallero, who, sent by him rightly to Libya, he is back now. The reason for the return, as the Duce says, is due to concern about the His personal position "(G. Ciano, op. cited above, pp. 667-668). A confirmation of the distrust that was enveloping the Chief of GS General occurs in an interview took place on November 12 between the King and the Prince of Piedmont, in which Umberto reported that the situation had become critical Cavallero as the leading exponents of the Army were against him (Paolo Puntoni, *Parla Vittorio Emanuele III*, Palazzi, Milan 1958, p. 103).
- (58) DSCS, tele. 03/16493 date 11/13/1942, 23:30. To give even an idea of the poor function of the organization of command wanted by Cavallero, just cite an urgent request for fuel, intended for delivery to Sidi Barrani, forwarded by Rommel to the Supreme Commander on November 6. The same evening Gen. Magli, assigned to the Comando Supremo, addressed Deleaze for the fulfillment of the request.
- (59) Cavallero Diary, date 11/15/1942.
- (60) David Irving, *La pista della volpe*, Mondadori, Milano 1978, p. 255.
- (61) DSCS, tele. 33564 / Op. date 11/15/1942, 21:07 hours.
- (62) E. Rommel, op. cited above, p. 318.
- (63) DSCS, tele. 11300/Op. On 11/17/1942, at 09:25, from ACIT - Attachment n. 3.
- (64) DSCSFAL, tele. 19131/Op. date 11/15/1942, 24:00 hours.
- (65) DSCS, tele. 33570 / Op. date 11/16/1942, 13:55 hours.
- (66) DSCSF AL, F.01 / 19041/Op. date 11/13/1942. Note that that day Bastico followed Cavallero to Benghazi for the meeting with Barbasetti and may recover in Homs, the Chief of Staff General he had spent the night, guest of Bastico. So a letter was agreed between the two and probably was intended to provoke a decision by Mussolini.
- (67) DSCS, tele. 33563 / Op. date 11/15/1942. The next day Cavallero noted in his diary that Bastico was tired.
- (68) Cavallero Diary letter date 11/16/1942, Attachment. 4.
- (69) E. Rommel, op. cited above, p. 320.
- (70) DSCS, tele. 33581 / Op. date 11/17/1942, 20:45.
- (71) Diary Cavallero, date 11/16/1942.
- (72) In early July, the *Giovani Fascisti* concentrated in the area Ghemines-Solluch, south of Benghazi. Transferred during the month, towards the Egyptian border, they occupied the Fort Capuzzo and the oasis of Siwa. September 1st was collected in Siwa, less a group of artillery posted in Giarabub. On September 17 he received reinforcement from the 3rd Recon. Bn. of the 21st *Panzer*.
- As called *Armored*, designation it held very loosely for a long time, the division will not ever had the features. Its table of origination included, but, one Tank Regiment, one infantry and one motorized artillery in six groups, including two semoventi; however he remained devoid of a Tank Regiment and group semoventi. In December, he will receive, instead, a second infantry regiment, the new 8th bersaglieri.
- (73) It is worth saying, however, that intervened in favor of an extraordinary event. At Ajdabiya Rommel was just desperate: " *supplies by air Impossible* - Kesselring had told him - *because your troops beyond the aerial radius of action* ". Except that on the morning of the 21st he became aware from Gen. Seidemann, of the *FliegerfuhrerAfrika*, shouting that the whole coast between El Agheila and Marsa el-Brega lay hundreds of cans of petrol. It was the ship's cargo *Hans Arp*, torpedoed on the 17th, pushed ashore by the currents.
- (74) Cavallero Diary, date 11/17/1942.
- (75) On 19 Rommel had telegraphed von Rintelen: " *Please tell me what deductions on the future conduct of operations drawn by Mussolini and the Comando Supremo from my report of 17 November on the status and strength of the army. If you come and battle on the positions of Marsa Brega, non-motorized Italian units will suffer, in all probability, the same fate of their comrades at El Alamein (...). This is why I repeat my request has often been forwarded to motorize the units on foot through assignments of vehicles of the Intendenza* "(tele n. 144/42 Segr.. Dated 11/19/1942, 09:30).

- (76) As of November 20 had been completed in the positions and main strongholds were being completed those of other positions. The deployment of 8,000 anti-tank mines on the spot and recovered barbed wire proceeded with alacrity. Coming from behind were 6,500 anti-tank mines and many passive obstacles, while at Tripoli was preparing to send 11,000 anti-tank mines and 3,000 other mines. Also they were already in the water systems of efficiency el-Agheila (70 cubic meters / day), Marsa el-Brega (30 mc /d.), Maaten Bescer (150 mc / g.) And Marada (100 mc/d).
- (77) Cavallero Diary, date 11/20/1942.
- (78) *Ibid*, date 11/21/1942.
- (79) DSCSFAL, tele. 19393/Op. date 11/21/1942, 14:15, deciphered in Rome at 17:00 the same day.
- (80) DSCSFAL, date 11/23/1942, transcript of interview - Attachment. 5.
- (81) DSCSFAL, tele. 19448 / Op. date 11/22/1942, 21:15.
- (82) Cavallero had to comment: "*I do not exclude that Bastico has been influenced environment (ie Rommel)*" (Cavallero Diary, date 11/23/1942).
- (83) Minutes of the meeting, Attachment. 6.
- (84) Cavallero Diary, date 11/25/1942.
- (85) *Ibid*, date 11/24/1942.
- (86) DSCS, tele. 33707 / Op. date 11/25/1942, 14:00 hours.
- (87) DSCSFAL, tele. 3064 / Op. Date 11/27/1942, 13:15 of ACIT.
- (88) "*are received by Marshal Rommel telegrams relative also to the West front, drawn up in such a form as to suggest that he is considered supreme commander in N.A. (...) 'Relived Bastico* (DSCSF AL, tele. 01/19671/Op. Date 11/27/1942).
- (89) DSCSFAL, tele. 01/19610 / Op. date 11/26/1942, 12:40.
- (90) DSCSFAL, tele. 01/19612 / Op. date 11/26/1942, 12:50.
- (91) DSCSFAL, tele. 01/19660 / Op. date 11/27/1942, 12:15.
- (92) DSCSFAL, tele. 5368 date 11/28/1942, at 12:20, Gen. Mancinelli.
- (93) DSCSFAL, tele. 149/42 date 11/28/1942, 7.30, from ACIT.
- (94) DSCSFAL, tele. 01/19718 / Op. date 11/28/1942, 16:45.
- (95) Cavallero Diary, date 11/28/1942, Attachment. 7.
- (96) *Ibid*, date 11.28.1942. Col. von Waldenburg replaced the Gen. von Rintelen, injured the 24th in a plane crash on the way back to Rome from Libya.
- (97) *Ibid*, message of Hitler to Mussolini, received by teletype from the German embassy in Rome (Col. Von Waltenburg) 22:30 of date 11/28/1942).
- In those days the aAdm. Weichold signaled, via the military attaché, that 27 November the docks of the port of Tripoli were blocked by more than 400 tons of material. The Supreme Command thanked for the communication and added, with more sadness than irritation: "*Do not feel you have to explain the situation of vehicles in Libya, the number of which is totally inadequate to needs*".
- (98) *Ibid*, memoriam No. 122, date 11/29/1942, Attachment. 8.
- (99) B.H. Liddell Hart, op. cited above, p. 366-367. Rommel believed that Goering wanted the transfer of the African front to the Luftwaffe, considering it easier to collect laurels overseas.
- (100) Albert Kesselring, War Memoirs, Garzanti, Milan 1954, p. 152.
- (101) B.H. Liddell Hart, op. cited above, p. 367.
- (102) Cavallero Diary, date 01/12/1942.
- (103) The emphasis of Goering and optimism were infectious. Ciano reports in his diary, on 1o December: "*The officers of the following Goering speak up: declare certain that in three months the German armored forces have reached Morocco. Also on the fight in Russia are forecast rosy*" (Galeazzo Ciano, Diary 1937-43 , Rizzoli, Milano 1980, p. 673).
- (104) The telegram compiled for Bastico (will start at 23:45 with no changes) it contains details of strange detail: "*3. Infantry not equipped with vehicles must be*

evacuated with vehicles provided from this command. 4. On new positions have to take time also less mobile artillery. 5. Movement to do in batches at night to escape enemy observation & attack (...). "All things at that level of command just seem misplaced. The fact reflects a nasty habit, widespread in the Italian army, of "intrusiveness from the top in the scope and responsibilities of the subordinates (DSCS, tele. 33814/Op. date 01/12/1942).

(105) D. Irving, *La pista della volpe*, Mondadori, Milano 1978, p. 262.

(106) *Ibid.*

Chapter Two

THE ALLIED LANDINGS IN FRENCH NORTH AFRICA

1. OPERATION TORCH.

On June 19, during a allied political and military meeting in Washington, Gen. Brooke attended a meeting of the American Council of Chiefs of the joint G.S. to discuss the operational decisions to be made in the second half of the year and in 1943. "*I found that we were not unanimous in its general line*" he wrote in his diary, but that pretty was significant. According to the Americans -Now reassured by the naval victory at Midway (4-7 June), which marked a turning point in the Pacific War - operation *Bolero* for the opening of a second front in Europe⁽¹⁾ was to obtain absolute precedence over *Gymnast*⁽²⁾, that the landing in French North Africa. This last operation showed, in their view, sensitive problems:

"a) It reduced seriously reinforcements in the Middle East with possible disastrous consequences in that theater, because the situation in it is such that the indirect effects of operation *gymnast* can not give the necessary help to the British forces in the Middle East for support.

b) It would make more scarce naval concentrations in all other theaters. The most serious effect of this would have an effect on aircraft, aircraft carriers and escort ships.

c) The operation depends on the existence of certain political conditions in North Africa that is impossible to predict. If these conditions are unfavorable at the time of the attack, the consequences could be very serious.

d) The beneficial impact on the situation in Russia would probably be very limited".⁽³⁾

From the British point of view, however, the discourse to be approached in different terms and reflected the absolute conviction that it could not land in France with the size, the simultaneity and the extreme violence in the circumstances, before 1943. And in the meantime? Given the determination of Roosevelt for a US commitment on a large scale against the Germans in the course of 1942, there remained only the north-western Africa. The conclusions, summarized by Gen. Ismay, were therefore the following:

"1. Plans and preparations on the widest possible scale for operation *Bolero* in 1943 should be pursued with the utmost speed and energy. However, it is essential that the US and Britain be prepared to go on the offensive already in 1942 .

2. Operations in France or in Belgium and the Netherlands during 1942 would give, if successfully carried out, political and strategic results far greater than those achieved with operations in any other theater. Plans and preparations for this operation should therefore be pursued with all haste, energy and ingenuity possible. They should make more resolute efforts to overcome the dangers and difficulties apparently related to the company. If you could

devise a reasonable and feasible plan, we would not hesitate to put it in place. If the difference represents, after a thorough examination, that despite all the efforts success is unlikely, we must have another plan ready.

3. The possibility of the operation *Gymnast* in French North Africa will be examined carefully and conscientiously and plans for will be completed in all its details as soon as possible. The forces to be used in the *gymnast* would for the most part those same unit intended for the operation *Bolero* which have not yet left the United States. The possibility of operations in Norway and in the Iberian Peninsula in the fall and winter of 1942 will be also carefully considered by the Chiefs of Staff.

4. The studies for the operation *Bolero* continue to have the focus in London, those for the operation *gymnast* will have the focus in Washington⁽⁴⁾.

The accepted priority *Bolero* by British masked therefore the intention to implement as soon as possible *Gymnast*, drawing without many scruples to the preparations of *Bolero*. The British did not take kindly to an attack on the European fortress if not submitted in 1943 for more than one reason. Not by chance a few days later, during a visit in fire exercises in American at Fort Jackson, Ismay said to Churchill: "*To oppose German soldiers with these troops to would be tantamount to murder*"⁽⁵⁾.

But apart *Round-up*, was designed another operation across the Channel, called *Sledgehammer*, aimed to establish a beachhead in Cherbourg or Brest with the use of nine divisions, of which seven British and a couple of American. Just returned to London, and in the light of the events in Egypt, Churchill hastened to Roosevelt that "*no general, admiral or British Air Marshal in charge is willing to support the operation 'Sledgehammer' be practicable in 1942*". An effort that would have been premature in all likelihood would have jeopardized the chances of a big success in the following year. However:

4. Personally, I am convinced that the operation *Gymnast* against North Africa French is so much better to give relief to the Russian front in 1942. This square perfectly with your ideas; In fact, of easing pressure on the eastern front is your overriding concern. This is the true "second front" of 1942; I consulted both the Cabinet and the Committee of Defense, and we all agree. It constitutes the operation safer and more fruitful that we can make in the fall (...)"⁽⁶⁾.

And just to leave no doubt about his firm resolve, Churchill offered Roosevelt the command of an American general for *Bolero* (Gen. Marshall) and at the same time stated that:

"I hope, Mr. President, that you will make sure that the appointment of an American commander with the task of carrying out the operation *Bolero* in 1943 did not affect operations of immediate importance which is operation *Gymnast*"⁽⁷⁾.

In the United States the general atmosphere showed indeed contrary to a commitment in Africa. The Minister of War, Stimson, considered the French North Africa as "*the last among all the priorities that*

we face ", Marshall believed that *gymnast* would eventually have a negative impact on the execution of *Round-up* in 1943 and Adm. King was decidedly hostile to the diversion of naval forces from the Pacific. While King then continued to preach the need to concentrate every effort against Japan, there is a danger that Marshall, who had accepted the concept but *Germany first*, disappointed by the British to eventually adopt the thoughts of King.

In fact soon he was led to envisage the President the opportunity for a radical change of strategy, where the British had agreed to enter into *Sledgehammer*. If this occurs, "*we should assign primary importance to the Pacific theater and deal a decisive blow against Japan; in other words, take a defensive stance with regard to Germany, except in the field of air operations, and use all the resources available in the Pacific*".⁽⁸⁾

But Roosevelt was sensitive to the arguments of Churchill. London sent Harry Hopkins, Marshall and King for another conference with British leaders, giving them precise instructions, although formally narrow gap on the action to be taken. Given the desire to reach an agreement about the final plans for the second half of 1942 and the provisional for 1943, he made it clear that it was necessary to examine carefully the viability of *Sledgehammer*, especially in the case of the Soviet collapse. "*Only if you are absolutely convinced - he wrote - that the operation 'Sledgehammer' can not be performed with a reasonable chance of achieving the goal that is proposed, you will have to ask other instructions.*" Post an overriding need to keep firmly in the Middle East (understood in very broad sense) in all circumstances, including the collapse of the Soviet front, Roosevelt prospected two types of solution. A, so to speak, 'passive': strengthen air and land in the Persian Gulf, Syria and Egypt; the other 'active', "*a new operation in Morocco and Algeria seeking to force the rear of the position of Rommel's army*".⁽⁹⁾

As might be expected, having to face three-quarters of the burden for *Sledgehammer* the British made a wall: the only viable initiative in 1942 was *gymnast*. A beachhead in France so reduced as expected by *Sledgehammer*, they explained, would be eliminated by the Germans without much effort even before spring had nourished and expanded and, ultimately, the deal would have led to unnecessary loss of some ten divisions. The Americans reported Roosevelt to be at an impasse and asked instructions, and the President transmitted immediately: not seem appropriate to stiffen of *Sledgehammer*, then I might as well agree to *gymnast*. On July 24, the project was renamed *Torch*. He was to take place by 30 October.

The Americans Chiefs of the G.S. welcomed the decision without objection. After all, having to choose between sending reinforcements to the Middle East and the

landing in North Africa, the latter allowed a course of action is more flexible regarding the danger of a Soviet collapse, both with respect to the planned landing in France in the following year. It seems that Marshall has also due to the provision of significant difficulties arising from the "mixing" American troops with the British in Egypt under a British commander in chief.

However, according to both, the acceptance of *Torch* excluded the possibility to enter into *Round-up* in 1943. They were right.

It was necessary now dissolve any hesitation on the issue of the commanders. Churchill proposed to confer on Marshall the chief command of *Round-up*, with an adaptation to the circumstances. For the moment Gen. Eisenhower would have moved to Britain as a substitute for Marshall to oversee the preparation of plans for *Bolero* and *Round-up* and work for operation *Torch*, all with the collaboration of Gen. Alexander. Once the planning of *Torch*, he would assume the chief command of the operation, with Alexander at the head of the British army departing from the UK and a US general in chief of the US departing from America. At this point, Marshall (or a substitute) would come to Britain to pursue *Bolero*.

The activity of Eisenhower began immediately. The greatest danger for *Torch* was not so much represent the possible French opposition, as by the possibility that the Axis disembark successively more forces into Tunisia. It was therefore "*mount an operation that advancing rapidly toward the east, at least up to Tunis - Eisenhower remembered - and to achieve surprise and power needed were considered indispensable a strong initial landings in the Mediterranean*" ⁽¹⁰⁾. On this basis, planning proceeded expeditiously, albeit momentarily disturbed on August 10 from a series of management changes. As we know, the war events in Egypt led Churchill to replace Gen. Auchinleck with Gen. Alexander as command in chief of the Middle East and to assign the 8th Army to Gen. Gott. In place of Alexander, besides Eisenhower, was replaced by Gen. Montgomery. The sudden death of Gen. Gott involved moving Montgomery to the 8th Army and the target of "*a Scotsman named Anderson*," Eisenhower wrote down, the head of British troops for *Torch*. Baffled by two changes in forty-eight hours in a role so delicate, he could not help but ask Gen. Ismay, the bearer of the news: "*Do the British really take seriously operation 'Torch'?*"

On August 14, Eisenhower officially received the nomination as commander of the allied expedition. The guidelines were communicated to him a week later, were expressed as follows:

"The operations must be conducted in order to achieve, as rapidly as possible, the following objectives initial, intermediate and final:

1. Establishment of beachheads solid and capable of mutual support on the north coast, areas of Algerian Oran-Tunis, and on the northwest coast,

in the area of Casablanca, in order to have undergone appropriate basis to continue and intensify air operations, land and sea.

2. Vigorous and rapid exploitation of the success from the beachheads made in order to acquire direct control of the entire region including French Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia (you will need to be ready to undertake a similar operation against the Spanish Morocco, in the event of a hostile action by the Spanish) in order to facilitate concrete air and ground operations against the enemy and create favorable conditions for large-scale operations to the east, through Libya, against the rear of the Axis forces in the Western Desert.

3. Complete destruction of the Axis forces that confront the British forces in the Western Desert and enhancement of actions against air and naval installations Axis in the Mediterranean in order to ensure communication across the Mediterranean and to allow operations against the axis on the European continent" ⁽¹¹⁾.

Followed the invitation to continue their education on this basis and to make a calculation of the necessary means. But the launch of the planning difficulties encountered yet. An initial project was planned for the first wave a group of eleven at brigade level ⁽¹²⁾, four in Casablanca, three at Grano, three in Algiers and one in Bona. A second project will not tip clearly in favor of the Mediterranean, focusing all landings in Algeria, from Grano to Bona. Marshall telegraphed from Washington an open unanimous disapproval of the opinion, the project offered less than 50% chance of success and seemed to ignore the possibility of German air raids from Spain or Spanish Morocco. In other words, the Pentagon feared a real bottling in the Mediterranean, especially if Spain had helped the Axis (sketch n. 12).

It then passed to design a landing in Algeria with the aim of occupying as quickly as possible Tunisia and, at the same time, one in French Morocco able to control the Strait of Gibraltar, invading, where applicable, the Spanish Morocco. The first action, of course, was of crucial importance.

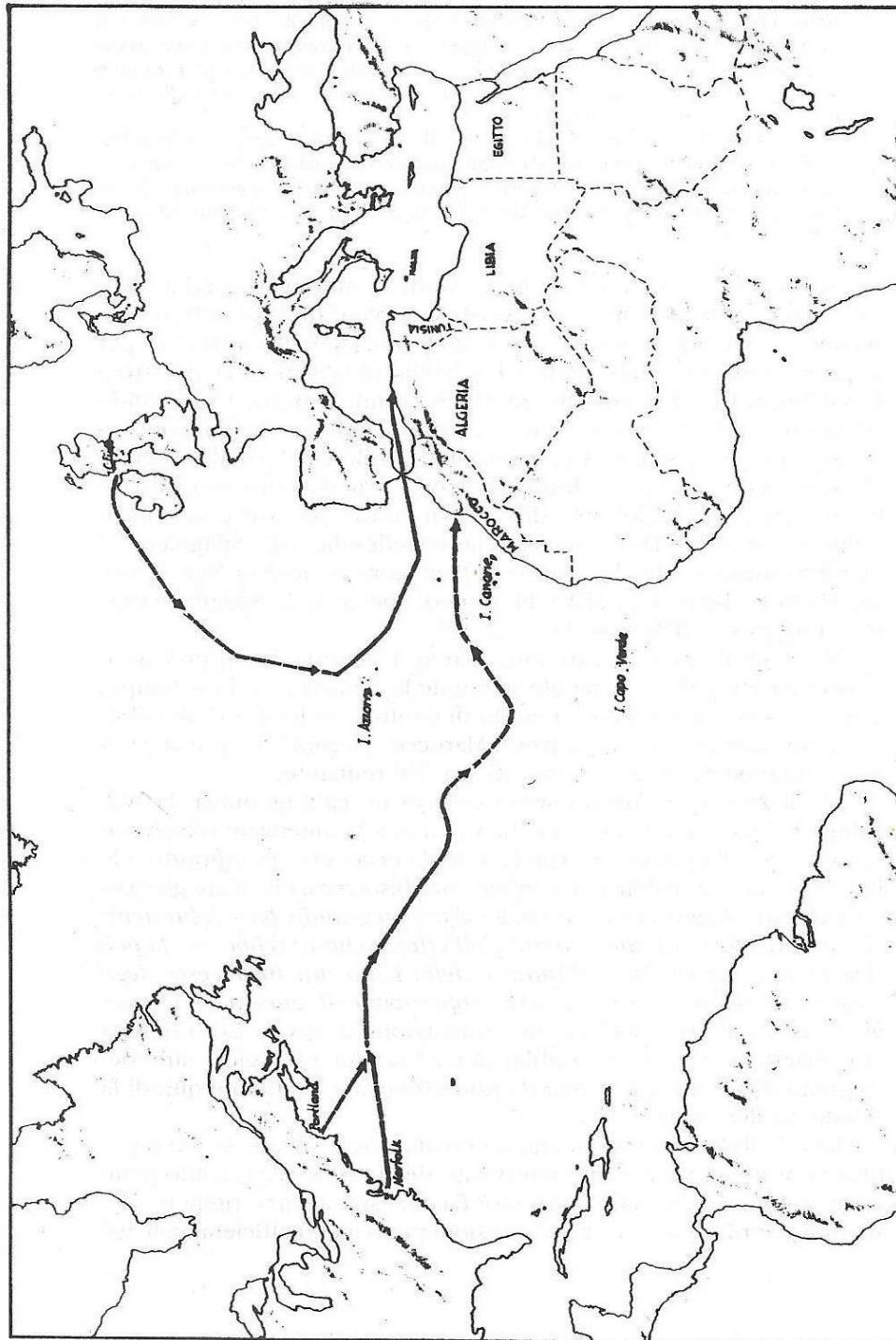
But on August 25 Eisenhower received a cable from Washington. Marshall stated that the Americans leaders of the G.S. believed the *Torch* operation formula on scale excessive, in relation to the limited available forces, and consequently to be eliminated landings in the Algerian Bona stretch. "*The risk is too great, especially considering the extreme severity of the effect it would have on the people of occupied Europe, India and China, a failure of the United States, in their first major operation of the war*" ⁽¹³⁾ explained Marshall concluded that the operation had to be reduced to two American landings at Casablanca and Grano; the British would come as reinforcement, so as not to antagonize and therefore the resistance of the French.

Possible oppositions were actually overestimated how you could think of a powerful intervention of the *Luftwaffe* even when Rommel had been granted? It could be considered as present in North Africa fourteen divisions more or less efficient with 500

The overall picture of operation Torch

Schizzo n. 12

IL QUADRO GENERALE DELL'OPERAZIONE TORCH



aircraft? However, in London the impression aroused by the communication of Marshall was depressing. Eisenhower and his *staff* seemed frankly inclined to accept the British point of view, however, it was doubtful they could reject for long the opposition of the Pentagon and even more doubt they managed to overcome the pressures of Washington departments concerned, according to which the road had to be established only when all you need for the task (people, equipment, materials, ships, aircraft, etc.) would be set aside in a large measure.

Even Churchill was desolated by the stance of the leaders of the US General Staff. He turned to Roosevelt, insisting on the absolute need to take now also Algiers, "*the keystone of the whole operation*". He gave a long dissertation on the advantages and disadvantages of the plan and finally threw the thing into politics:

"(...) I hope, Mr. President - he wrote on August 27 - that you will keep my promise to Stalin, supported by Harriman with your full approval. If the operation *Torch* fails, or under intense reductions, as is now being proposed, my position it will be severely diminished. For all these reasons please that the sizzling memorandum will be reviewed and that it allows the American ally commander in chief proceeding to implement the plans already prepared by him, to which we are all now working day and night (...)"⁽¹⁴⁾.

Roosevelt replied on 30 August. Premise the net exposure to perform initial landings with only American troops in the almost certainty that a joint effort of Anglo-American would have caused "*the greatest strength of all French people of Africa*." In a week from the D-day felt able to guarantee] "*absence of hostility from the French and then the green light via the British Army. There were no weather problems*," it is our belief that the aviation and the German parachute troops can not intervene in Algiers or Tunis formations with some consistency, if not a couple of weeks after the start of the attack."

That said, it proposed the establishment of two beachheads at Casablanca and Grano and their subsequent road and rail connections, so as to allow the creation of a base of operations to secure, in Morocco. Britain could orientate -if allowed by the available naval forces-for a third landing, east of Grano, a week after the initial ones, on the understanding that such third landing was made with ships not necessary for the operation *Torch* (restricted to the American).

Churchill champing at the bit. For Algiers it would even allowed that the British assault troops provided with US uniforms! But he could not attack Roosevelt head on and patiently tried to convince him touching keys also political and face psychological. Eventually he appeared. On September 3, Roosevelt agreed to include Algiers among the objectives of the first phase. In this perspective, to Casablanca it was provided 34,000 men plus 24,000 of reinforcement, all Americans; Grano,

25,000 men plus 20,000, also all Americans; Algiers, a first wave of 10,000 Americans, followed less than an hour away to British troops. The divisions of the second line had to be unloaded in a port (sketch n. 13).

It was already a lot, but not enough to meet Churchill, who replied to the President highlighting the opportunity to subtract 10 to 12,000 men in the expedition of Casablanca to add to that of Algiers. And finally the agreement was achieved. The date of the transaction was still *sub-judice*. The suggestion made by Eisenhower to Churchill was "On 8 November, ie sixty days from now"⁽¹⁵⁾.

With the passing of the weeks the plan acquired a physiognomy more concrete and reassuring, even if "*the logistical situation was so confused that in mid-September was the obvious inability to launch an invasion for the beginning of November*"⁽¹⁶⁾. However on September 22, the date of 8 November was confirmed as the D-day.

Without going into details of organizational of *Torch*, is also appropriate to mention the characteristics of the expedition, the first Anglo-American "combined operation". The approach to the beaches of ships or landing craft⁽¹⁷⁾ involved joint *forces* different from the usual one. The large units or tactical groups for the initial landing, ie, units of attack, included part 'assault' and a 'floating reserve'; the divisions of the second row or in reserve, intended for subsequent landings on time, kept usually the normal articulation. The units of attack were transported according to a 'stowage for the attack', typical of the landing craft, so as to be able to rapidly take the ground in a certain order, or according to a 'tactical stowage', that is, so as to obtain an adequate the unload certain usage requirements. The transport of the divisions of the second line or reserve answered, however, the criterion to maximize the capacity of the vessels. The assault units were distinguished in "waves" and "sub-waves".

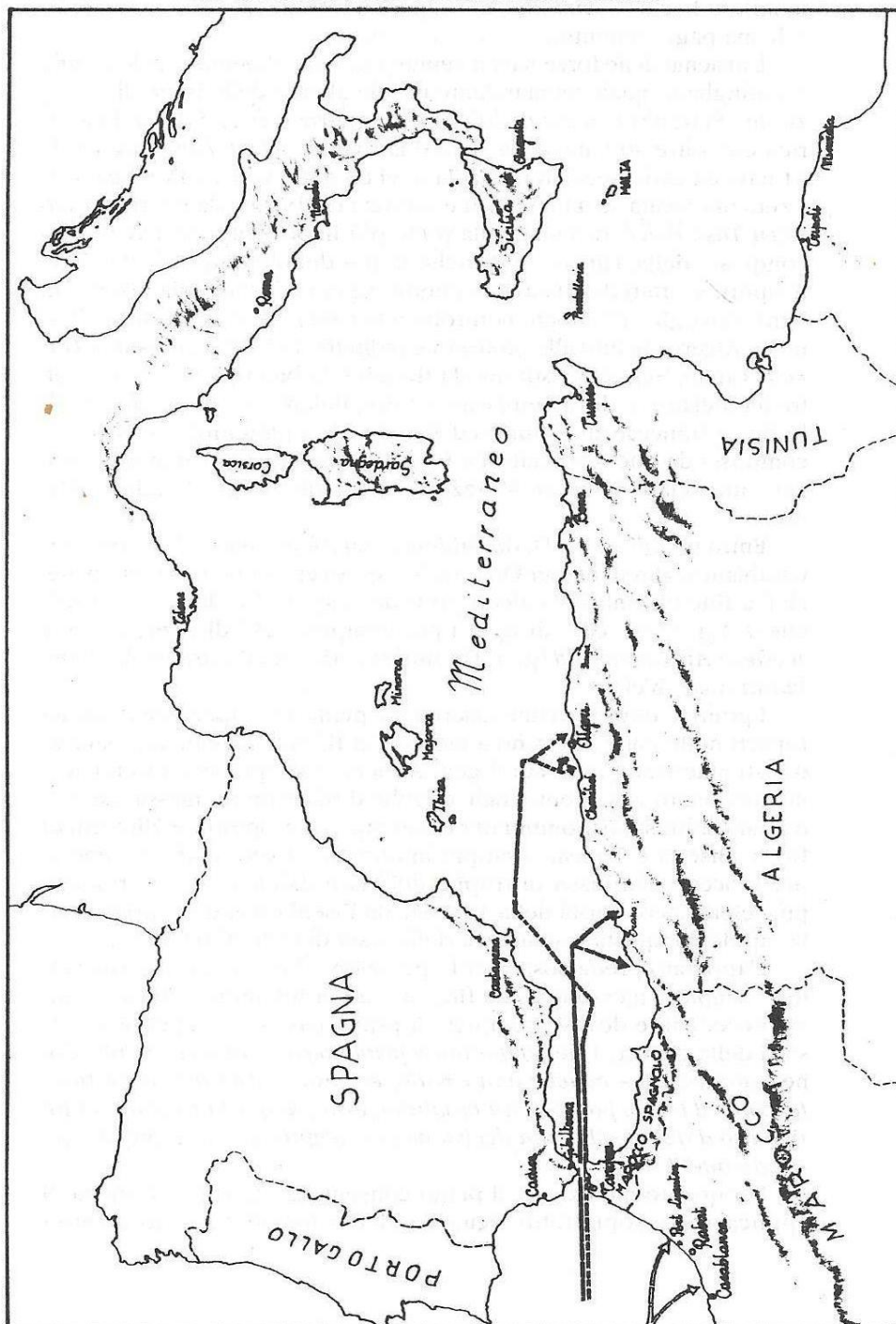
According to the plan issued on September 20, the landings were to be made on a number of beaches at Casablanca, Algiers and Grano. Achieved the initial objectives - including the port and the neighboring airports - the beachheads of Casablanca and Grano were combined to allow the influx of the US 5th Army, which was responsible to face the German threat from Spain or disorders in Spanish Morocco. That had to expand rapidly in Algiers to allow the fielding of the British 1st Army, in charge of moving to Tunisia. The units directed to Casablanca departed from the United States, the other from the United Kingdom.

The attack force amounted to a total of 65,000 men, divided into three aliquots. The *Western Task Force* (Gen. Patton) included five *Combat Teams* of infantry, and an Armored *Combat Command*, for a total of 25,000 men and 250 tanks. The *Center Task Force* (Gen. Fredendall) includes the 16th, 18th and 26th *Combat*

The landings of operation Torch

Schizzo n. 13

GLI SBARCHI DELL'OPERAZIONE TORCH



Team, a *Combat Command* and The I *Ranger* battalion, for a total of 18,500 men and 180 tanks. The *Eastern Task Force* (Gen. Ryder) had the American 39th and 168th *Combat Team*, the British 11th and 36th Brigades and the 1st and 6th mixed *Commandos*, for a total of 20,000 men (see Diagram next page).

The whole of the naval forces was placed in the employ of Admiral Cunningham, as “Naval Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces”. It was more than 300 warships and about 370 cargo ships with more than 400 means of disembarkment. The *Western Task Force*, served by 31 cargo ships and escorted by 74 warships; the *Center Task Force* had embarked on 44 transport and escorted by 48 warships; the *Eastern Task Force*, for the most important part to start the conquest of Tunisia, but also the weakest, was loaded on 33 transports escorted by 40 warships. Battleships inserted in each convoy would control the French ships bases in Oran and Algiers. As for the indirect protection in the Mediterranean was *Force H* (Adm. Syfret), consisting of three battleships, three aircraft carriers, three cruisers and seventeen destroyers, he was to prevent the French Fleet in Toulon and Italian intervention. The *Force G*, composed of two British cruisers and three destroyers, had to cross south of the Azores to ensure landings in Morocco.

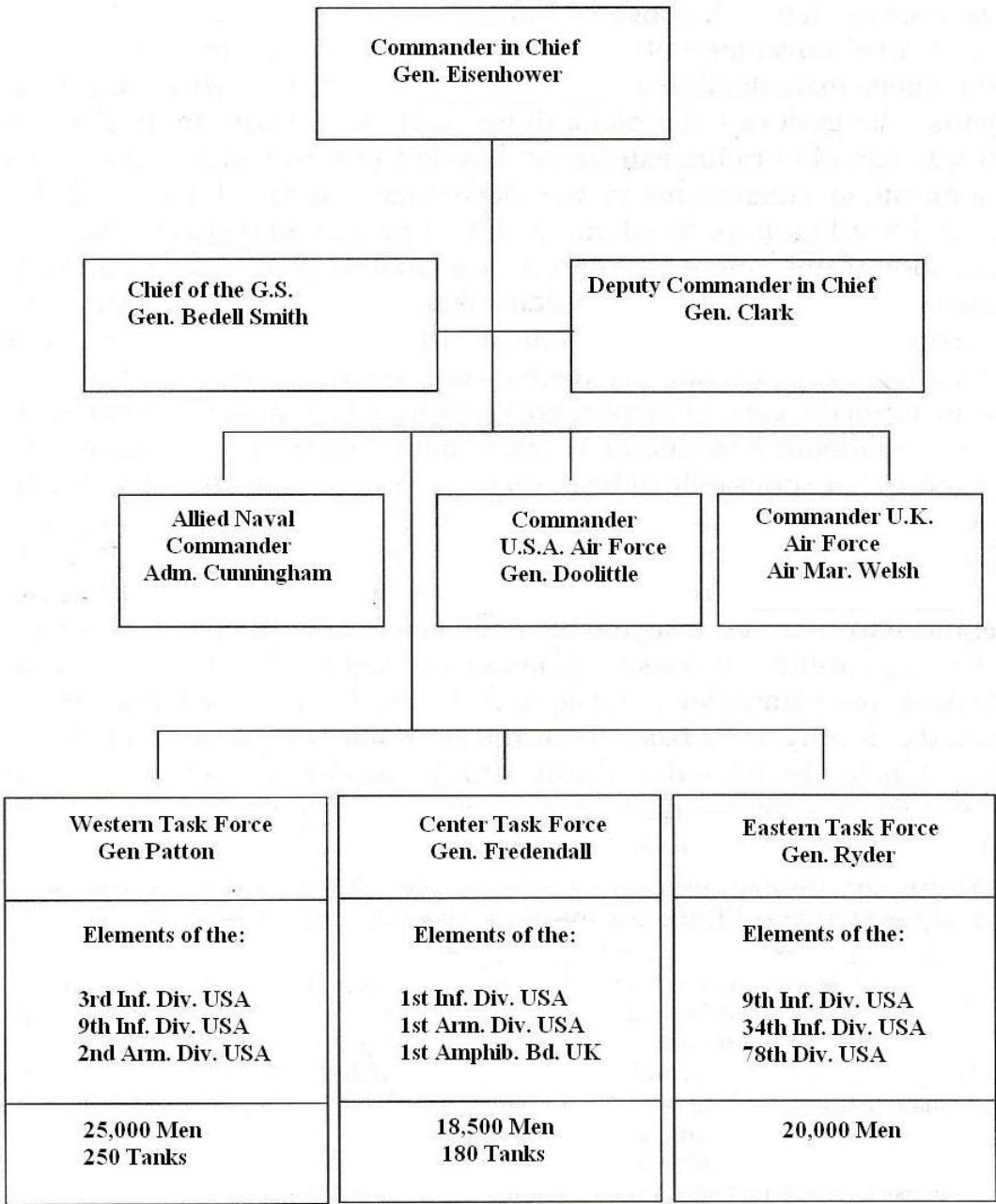
Within three days of D-day, from Gibraltar 160 aircraft would depart for Casablanca, the same for Grano and 90 for Algiers. After seven weeks, that is, in late December, the calculations predicted in western North Africa 1,244 aircraft of all kinds, including 232 of the reserve in the *Western Air Command* (Gen. Doolittle) and 454 for the *Eastern Air Command* (Mar. Welsh).

The first of October was included in the plan the occupation of the airports in the areas of Grano by half of the American II/509th Parachute Regiment, something which Gen. Anderson was fiercely opposed to in vain. He would have liked to mass with all available paratroopers to occupy airports near Bona, Bizerte and Tunis, far more important, in his view, to block the influx of Axis troops from Italy and to make it rapid conquest of Tunisia. But Eisenhower gave priority to the rapid conquest and security of the Grano beachhead.

The aircraft designed for the operation *Torch* were the most significant and complete until then put together for an unprecedented amphibious operation and had to take the first step to turn the tide of the war. This “*important first step* - said the US report - *although not shy, was hesitant and a little reluctant, as the first step of a child, it was the answer to a surge of action that a decision to reach a specific destination*” ⁽¹⁸⁾.

As detailed, the plan allowed for some flexibility of application, especially regarding some moments, and this because

THE ALLIED DISPOSITIONS FOR OPERATION TORCH



French attitude which could complicate or facilitate the invasion. In order to become fully aware of the complexity of the political and military situation in French North Africa, it must be recalled the existing organization at the time.

Until November 1941, the political and military power was centralized in the hands of the Director General of governance in Africa, in Gen. Weygand, who enjoyed the full confidence of Mar. Petain. At that time Weygand was recalled and functions were divided. He was appointed a commander of the ground and air forces in North Africa (Gen. Juin) and one in West Africa (Gen. Boisson) with only military powers. The Governor of Algeria and resident General of Morocco and Tunisia passed, or rather returned employed by the ministries concerned. So in November 1942 they had three political leaders (the resident general in Morocco, Gen. Noguès; the governor general of Algeria, Chatel, the resident general in Tunisia, Adm. Esteva) and a commander in chief, responsible for military (Gen. Juin), which depended on Gen. Mendigal, commander of the air force, and-but within certain limits - the top commanders of the armed forces in the three regions.

In this framework, political contacts for the success of *Torch* had been treated exclusively by the Americans and is centered on the contacts established by the consul general in Algiers, Murphy, with Gen. Mast, division commander of Algiers. The situation represented by Murphy, based on French information, appeared in unstable equilibrium. Allied efforts in the short term against Dakar and/or Casablanca were given as discounted by Japanese and German sources and the French were urged to take precautions to prevent their favorable attitude to the invaders compel Germany and Italy to intervene in the region.

"The Germans - Murphy telegraphed - appeared determined to resolve the issue of the western Mediterranean in the coming weeks, to do this, they will have the use of the territory of Spain and Spanish Morocco. Gibraltar is under constant surveillance. According to the French, the German action is a question not of weeks but of days. The French political situation is extremely delicate and the collapse may also occur within ten days. There is no doubt that the situation in French North Africa is moving quickly. According to certain information Axis would collect 100,000 men on the Tunisian border" ⁽¹⁹⁾.

Moreover, regardless on the reliability of the information, there was a significant problem of French personalities to be placed as the highest authority of northwest Africa. Under the circumstances, the choice appeared very delicate and there were doubts about any possible leader. The main local leaders were Gen. Juin, and Gen. Noguès, but both, while substantially favorable to the allies, showed themselves clearly inclined to await events. Willing to collaboration were instead cited Gen. Mast, former chief of the G.S. of Juin, and Gen. Bethouart, commander of the division of Casablanca, Morocco; But none of them possessed the

rank and prestige necessary to the task.

Adm. Darlan, commander in chief of the Vichy armed forces and designated successor to Petain as head of state, seemed inclined to move to Algeria taking with him the fleet of Toulon and, in all probability he would get the obedience of the whole of French Africa, but the character appeared elusive, ambitious and uncertain faith and, moreover, harbored little disguised dislike of Britain. There would be within reach De Gaulle, but reasons of contrary nature placed him out of the running: his gesture of defiance to Petain and his work on the British side had earned him hostility from the officers who considered the Vichy government as the only lawful one. Moreover, from his arrogance was born very sore feelings from Roosevelt and Churchill.

He remained the candidacy of Gen. Giraud, commander of the army in 1940 and well known for his escape from captivity in Germany. Currently he was in Lyon under discreet police surveillance and he could be the right man. Gen. Mast, his ardent and staunch supporter, asking for his illegal transport to Algiers: according to him, the French forces would have been for him with absolute certainty, so that with a notice of four days landings have been possible "*without firing a shot*", something very difficult to hope against the unreliable Darlan. True it is that the Allies would probably were very puzzled if they had known the real thought of Giraud. In a letter to Jan. Odic he had written: "*We do not want the Americans liberate us; we want to help us free ourselves from ourselves, which is not quite the same.*" However, Mast asked sending an American delegation qualified to discuss many aspects of the about face.

The meeting took place on 22 October in a lonely house, on the beach of Cherchel, for about ninety kilometers west of Algiers. The French, unaware of the start of the first Allied convoys from Britain, showed themselves most ready to cooperate; they provided detailed information on the data of strength, location and state of readiness of the units; They indicated the details of airports and suggested the best location for the launch of paratroopers and landing of airborne troops. Gen. Clark, who headed the group of American officers, he could hurry to report to Eisenhower that the plans appeared based on premises and assumptions valid and that there was the need to "*be prepared readily occupy Tunis with airborne units.*" According to forecasts, "*the bulk of the French army and air force oppose little resistance whether Giraud takes command in North Africa that is not given*"⁽²⁰⁾.

The first "advanced convoys" had left the UK on October 2, followed by many others: a formidable groups of oil, coal, cargo ships and auxiliary vessels. On the 22 it was the turn of the "slow convoys", made up of the ships loaded with tanks, vehicles of various

type, materials and supplies, and directed to Oran and Algiers.

On the 26th left the “fast convoys” with the troops. At the same time, between the 23rd and 24th, the ships of the expedition to Casablanca left the Atlantic ports of the United States.

Luck smiled on all convoys: between October 26 and November 3 isolated German reports, resulting from chance encounters with warships or cargo on routes to the Azores, they left the OKW almost indifferent, although by September they did insistent rumors of an Anglo-American landing in the Mediterranean. On November 3, a communication of the Portuguese liaison officer at the authorities in Lisbon revealed the imminence of a British contemporary attack from Gibraltar against Spanish Morocco and French North Africa and from Freetown, in the Sierra Leone, against Dakar and Casablanca, but the news was welcomed with reserve, did not cause special measures. Finally, on November 4, after repeated reports of an abnormal concentration of ships and the presence of at least fifty landing craft, the *Seekriegsleitung* and the OBS were convinced of the danger and, with different assumptions on the goals, they took the first precautionary steps.

Between 19:30 of the 5th and 14:00 of November 7, one hundred and forty Allied ships entered the Mediterranean in the programmed sequence. During the 7th the ships involved landings of Oran and Algiers and for security of the operation rose to about 220 of all types. That day *Force H* was attacked for the first time by 76 German bombers coming from Sardinia: a unproductive attack, since he could only damage the destroyer *Panther*.

The French are willing to cooperate, under the direction of Gen. Mast in Algeria and Gen. Bethouart in Morocco, despite having to imagine given the rumors of *Torch* being imminent giving voice to German-Italian countermeasures, not even remotely assumed that the operation was already under way. When they were informed, they were astonished, especially because it seemed impossible that Giraud could leave France before 20 November. Murphy became the spokesman of this embarrassment and on 1 November telegraphed to Washington recommending that D-day was delayed a couple of weeks: the problems of a technical nature were, in his view, of limited relevance "*in comparison of the consequences that would have a serious opposition to our landing by the French army,*" especially since Mast had observed that at such short notice was equivalent to almost "*an ultimatum of hostility*"⁽²¹⁾.

Of course, nothing was changed. Mast and Bethouart went to work their clandestine organizations, but the result of the efforts proved quite modest in Casablanca and Algiers and Oran in zero.

We must also add that politically the situation could not have been more tangling. Giraud arrived in Gibraltar on November 7 and was careful to make clear in no uncertain terms that

he expected to assume the supreme command of the Allied forces in North Africa. Eisenhower was appalled. After a night of discussions, and in the light of the success of landings, Giraud allowed to be transported to Algiers as soon as possible to become the commander in chief of the French armed forces and to cooperate with the Allies.

Except that, unpredictably, was Darlan in Algiers, being there on 4 November for family reasons, and this unexpected presence dramatically altered the hopes of French collaboration, because the admiral, according to a decree of June 24, 1942, had full powers on any matter of a military character concerning the safety of North Africa and French West Africa.

Operation *Torch* began the night on the 8 November. In Morocco, the story got complicated from the beginning. Gen. Patton had sarcastically predicted serious trouble caused by the incompetence of the *US Navy* ⁽²²⁾ and in fact occurred many setbacks and delays, but the confusion and hesitation in the French camp allowed making a landing without undue inconvenience. If at first Noguès remained uncertain, a little after 05:00, when he became convinced that he had to deal with a simple *command*, he took his position by ordering to reject the Americans and the arrest of Bethouart for treason. However the beachheads were created just the same.

For Grano did not fare much better. After the surprise, which had allowed unhindered landings, the French reaction manifested itself very strongly, so that by late morning the American penetration stopped. In Algiers, the feverish activity of Mast made easy and quick start of the allied operation, but the real problem to solve was political and its crucial value for all of Africa French. Gen. Juin, informed at 00:30 on 8 November by Murphy of imminent landing and arrival of Giraud, said he did not recognize the authority and invited him to address the call for cooperation with the Allies by Darlan. These, in turn, awakened by a phone call and asked to go to Juin, had a fit of rage against Great Britain and the United States, and only after insistence resolved initiative to ask Petain permission to act ⁽²³⁾.

Waiting for the answer, Darlan sent the order to cease fire to the troops and ships of the French sector of Algiers. At the same time he made the autonomous the region of Morocco with Grano to the west and Tunisia with the region of Constantine in the east, under the orders of the two resident general, respectively in Gen. Noguès and Adm. Esteva. Then came the authorization of Petain, established that the control of Algiers was transferred to the Americans at 20:00 that night.

The 9th was a day almost interim, although the French resistance in Morocco and Grano continued. In the afternoon Giraud arrived in Algiers -who, found the coldness of the highest local personalities, withdrew from the scene with dignity - and

Clark, who wanted to come quickly to a conclusion. At his meeting of the morning of the 10th Darlan, subjected to harsh pressure from Clark, it was decided to order the cessation of hostilities in the North Africa *"on behalf of Marshal Petain."* It was not immediately obeyed, because disavowed, actually *proforma*, by Petain himself, but soon the German invasion of southern France he took charge of arranging everything. Actually, for a while continued misunderstandings, wrong initiatives, reluctance by the French; however between the 11th and 13th was achieved a final agreement. Darlan was high commissioner and commander of the naval forces; Giraud, commander and chief of ground and air forces; Juin commander of the ground forces and in Gen. Mendigal of the air.

Eisenhower, satisfied with the successful outcome of the political and military negotiations, was far from imagining the storm the "compromise with Darlan" aroused. For too long, the admiral was presented by the press as a Nazi in order to be accepted by the public now. Facing the outbreak of popular indignation, particularly violent in the UK where the presence of De Gaulle presented a comparison of much more clarity, Roosevelt had the idea farfetched to explain publicly that *"in view of the events that took place over the past two months,"* was not possible *"to conclude an permanent agreement with Admiral Darlan "* and that the covenant was *"only a temporary expedient, justified only by the current military necessity"*⁽²⁴⁾. Obvious and inevitable bitterness of Darlan, who in a long letter to Clark complained of being considered *"just a lemon that Americans will throw away after having been squeezed"*. And just as inevitably affected the general discontent that had supported Darlan and had labored for cooperation with the Allies. Noguès even expressed the intention to resign.

As developed the Allied columns advancing to Tunisia, French troops mobilized feverishly. They had champing at the bit for more than two years. With a thousand precautions, while undergoing the staff reduction imposed by the terms of the armistice, had hidden weapons, ammunition, all of the stuff a bit everywhere.

The Commander in Chief had prepared a mobilization plan very accurate, designed to rapidly transform the units authorized under the armistice in divisions of the country. Were prepared two logistics bases in Algeria, near the Tunisian border, can feed an army corps. In short, the idea of revenge had been assiduously cultivated. As is inevitable, the reality was not negligible downsides: hidden stocks concerned old materials; allocations of existing units had worn considerably; the armament was in critical condition.

About the amount of effort mobilized, the 19th Military Region (now 19th corps) was to provide the divisions of march in Algiers, Constantine and Oran as well as a light mechanized brigade;

mechanized; the High Command of Tunisia, a group of forces corresponding to a division; the High Command of Morocco, two divisions of march and a light mechanized brigade. Divisions of march, more or less at the level of the binary division Italian and therefore relative efficiency, were particularly suitable for use in mountain areas.

The strategic plan had established the absolute conviction of having to defend North Africa against any hostile attempt. In light of what happened in Syria, was therefore considered to be the case of the need for the Board to establish a secure communication line through Tunisia, is that, for the UK to continue operations in Tunisia, aiming at the bases most useful for the subsequent invasion of Italy.

After long discussions on the course of action to take, the strategic veins concept established by Gen. Juin with the "Instruction" on 9 May 1942. In essence, since the preservation of Bizerte represented the goal of the struggle and taken as a ground offensive by the most likely hypothesis Tripoli, combined or not with actions by sea or air on Tunis and Bizerte, the Directive pointed out: renunciation of a battle on the positions of Mareth, view the impossibility of remilitarizing southern Tunisia; renouncing an open battle on the plain of Sousse-Gabès-Gafsa, given the enormous enemy superiority in armored forces; defense fortified camp of Bizerte; remedial action of a concentrated mass in the upper valley of Medjerda against the rear and the line of communications of an enemy besieging Bizerte. This conception retained value as he was the assailant, in case the British attacked ⁽²⁵⁾.

2. THE RESPONSE OF THE AXIS (November 1942).

On November 10 Cavallero wrote in his diary that in Gibraltar, the enemy was preparing a important convoy and commented that all the headquarters concerned had been placed in a state of alarm. He estimated it was going to Malta and, considering the news of the loading of fighter planes on the aircraft carrier *Furious*, he deduced the likelihood of bombing of Sicily. However he derived no particular cause for concern and the subject was not even touched upon in the interview that he had in the morning with Kesselring.

For a few days the attention of the Comando Supremo was polarized on the desperate struggle going on at El Alamein, but the evening of the 4th, in a meeting rather narrow, Adm. Riccardi showed himself worried for the naval force in construction. In his view it was an action in a big way and many signs were thought to be of a landing operation. They were collecting a battleship, three aircraft carriers, a monitor, twenty escort ships, thirteen cargo steamers and twelve tankers: too much for a simple diversionary action. He also knew of

many fighters embarked, so probably intended equip a base. The Germans, moreover, began to stir⁽²⁶⁾.

To fully realize the point of view of Riccardi, it should be noted that on October 28, in a memo entitled "Precautionary arrangement in anticipation of an English attack on French North Africa," he wrote:

"As you know you can not fight a British attack in Morocco or to Algeria. Instead you have a good possibility of action with naval vessels and aircraft in case of attack on Tunisia."

Even for the ground forces there was not much choice and the first guidelines concerned the *Spezia* Inf. Div., to move towards the Tunisian border, and *Piave* Mot. Div., to be transferred to Sicily, is to be able to send overseas for both the defense movement in the island in case of attempt to land. Actually, the operation C 4 (Tunisia) had been considered since the previous July, when it was revealed the possibility of an Anglo-American attempt to open in French North Africa foretold the second front. The hypothesis taken to the base of the studies contemplated contemporary Allied landings in Morocco and Algeria, as well as a local French attitude initially hostile to the invaders and then, just has emerged our reaction, hostile to Italy; all under the gaze uncertain of the Vichy government and the fleet of Toulon. The framework exactly matches the reality of November.

Passed through or by the departure of convoys from Gibraltar arrival of Allied troops at the border of Tunisia had been calculated ten days for the quick troops and fifteen for the bulk of the infantry. The speed factor clothed therefore great influence on the success of the occupation of Tunisia and this suggested starting it as soon as he had outlined the initiative allied with certainty; possibly crossing the Strait of Gibraltar. As for the consistency of the Italian expeditionary force, they were considered necessary in nine divisions of various types (including a paratrooper and a armored) grouped in two corps, framed in an army, many means and all possible aid from the Royal Marina and the Air Force. Since such availability proved chimerical, the whole matter was still pending.

At 23:30 of the 5th Adm. Sansonetti, Deputy Chief of the G.S. the Royal Marina, informed Cavallero that the naval force the enemy had left Gibraltar at 20:00 for unknown destination, but an array of submarines was ready at Mallorca and the OBS had already arranged for a reconnaissance the following dawn⁽²⁷⁾.

The morning of the 6th Kesselring went to the Comando Supremo. Regardless of the distressing situation of the ACIT, he did not hesitate to express serious concerns about the possibility of an Anglo-American landing in French North Africa. Now the information reported by the Italians of the first

convoy of fifty ships traveling and although the German still did not provide data of this kind could not be ignored that, if made sure of the imminent opening of a new African arena, it imposed two immediate steps: concentration of all the air effort against the convoy rather than in favor of the ACIT and precautionary landing in Tunis, also to support the French wishing to fight against the invaders. Meanwhile it seemed appropriate to divert the convoys planned for Benghazi and Tobruk move westward airbases of Tripoli. The occupation of Tunisia, already proposed to the Führer, would allow the long-awaited rapid communication between Sicily and Africa, Kesselring added and asked whether Italy had planned the operation.

"Everything is planned and prepared" Cavallero assured, but noted that it would have had to give up C2 (Corsica) and that in any case a landing without the consent of the French would have required the support of a naval force. And here stood the difficulty. *"First - he concluded - we need to see the attitude of the French. If they defend themselves [against the Anglo-American] or are at least neutral surely this is possible, or otherwise not suitable."* Mussolini, on the current issue, immediately expressed the belief that the enemy intended to set foot in northwestern Africa and that, moreover, the French would have made common cause with the Allies. If so, jump on Corsica and Italy agreed to keep an eye on the southern France, and maybe even occupy it. Also in this case, Tunisia was outside each operative hypothesis. In essence, it was the attitude of waiting for a political clarification (French behavior in Morocco-Algeria in case of landing) and defense against attempts on Sardinia and Corsica (18 submarines ready off the coast of the Balearic Islands, 10 in Cagliari and 6 in the channel of Sicily; 100 aircraft, of which 46 torpedo planes, able to intervene). Security in Corsica was attributed priority one.

On the German side, while waiting for a clarification of policy, guidance was aggressive. In the late afternoon the information became more precise and more alarming. The naval formation appeared include three battleships, three aircraft carriers, a monitor, six to eight cruisers, more than thirty streamers and sixty light ships. Obviously it was much more than a simple supply of Malta and Adm. Weichold of the OKW was ordered to throw all the U-boat on the convoy, because its destruction depended on the outcome of the operations in Africa. Later, at 23:30, Goering telephoned Kesselring. He was convinced that the attempt to land was directed towards Sardinia or Corsica, or even North Africa but not the French one: Tripoli or Derna seemed more plausible targets. Among other things, did not waste the opportunity to criticize the Marina, not *the* Sailors: *"If [the convoy] will not head to Sardinia or Corsica, continue certainly for the Sicilian Channel,*

where Italians have not mined the waters and this must be said clearly, "and at the mention of Kesselring about the recent "accomplishments" he snapped: " *But there are accomplishments and accomplishments! I see the same things at us. We must always trust the Sailors of all countries.* "And with this assumption Kesselring urged to appeal to the crews and to guide them personally to beat, decimate, destroy and disperse the convoy, thus balancing the defeat of El Alamein ⁽²⁸⁾.

The morning of the 7th - while planes of II *Fliegerkorps* and German and Italian submarines gave in principle opposed to the invasion fleet -Kesselring, Weichold and von Rintelen found at the Comando Supremo to communicate the directives received from the OKW. The advantage of assumptions about the intentions of Anglo-American was still open. Having calculated a group of about 190 ships of various types, in three formations, it became more and more evident the likelihood of a massive landing. Unfortunately the Italian fleet was unable to act because of the notable lack of fuel oil⁽²⁹⁾. The range of assumptions was widening by the hour but Hitler was convinced - and tried to convince Mussolini - that the landing would take place in Tripoli or Benghazi to cut off the retreat of Rommel ⁽³⁰⁾.

Late afternoon von Rintelen informed, on behalf of the OKW, which according to the confidential Spanish news three convoys were directed against Italy (British air strikes were under way to Savona, Genoa and Milan), while other convoys have landed 50,000 men on African shores. As very skeptical about the reliability of this communication, Cavallero ordered the alarm to coastal defense and the availability of intervention forces in Liguria, north of Rome between Rome and Naples.

At this point it seems useful and necessary clarification. Until November 7 the approach of *Torch* had been seen as part of the normal "alarms" always willing at unusual concentrations of ships in Gibraltar; assumptions had thickened, gradually the days passed, but nothing concrete for the opposition to the convoy had been decided. Kesselring himself later admitted: "*Since the German High Command and the Italian had not made the slightest preparation, he had to use at least temporarily makeshift measures to overcome the initial crisis and create a stronger basis for making further plans*"⁽³¹⁾. Therefore the use of attack aircraft and submarines was gradually adapted to the sightings and the media as they became available.

The operation C4 was, yes, expected, but in terms of simple preliminary study, well you know the difference between study and project plan (which often strangely eludes). For most it was known that that any initiative concern France or its colonial empire was to receive the *imprimatur* of Hitler. Since every thought and concern of the Führer were polarized on the Russian front, stemmed from that a lack of attention of the OKW

on the Mediterranean theater, and even some bored impatience with the requests for help coming from North Africa⁽³²⁾.

As for the Comando Supremo, one can say that they outlined, partly because taken from the Battle of El Alamein and its consequences, and partly because aware of his own helplessness. Not including the forces engaged in Libya and small parts spread in the Balkan theaters of war, and those nominally 'in recovery' in northern and central Europe, but in fact almost non-existent, the R. Aeronautica had a total in Sicily, Sardinia and Puglia of sixty bombers, about fifty torpedo planes and circa two hundred fighters efficient. The Royal Marina had decided to move from Taranto at Naples three battleships *Roma*, *Vittorio Veneto* and *Littorio*, and from Navarino to Messina the VIII Cruiser Division, but especially in view of the need to oppose Anglo-Americans attempts against the metropolitan territory.

In the early hours of 8 November all became clear: landings were taking place in Morocco and Algeria. In the evening Adm. Darlan ordered Algiers forces to cease fire. From that moment began the reply of the Axis.

The first thought was Cavallero to Corsica. But knowing what Hitler cared to follow, until convenient, a policy agreement with the Vichy government, explained to von Rintelen *"the need to give the country the feeling to do something to compensate for the probable loss of Libya now. Please OKW ask permission to apply C2. As a soldier the complaint, to avoid that Corsica is occupied by the De Gaullists"*⁽³³⁾. Then he explained to his interlocutor that if the island had fallen into hostile hands, the operation would become impossible because of the poverty of the Italian media and the danger of serious offense against the peninsula.

The thought of Cavallero on Tunisia was clear: nothing to do because there was no availability of the fleet, lacking tanks, they lacked 20-30 steamers needed for shipping. It also lacked the troops, because those sent to Corsica - the *Cremona* Inf. Div. and *Friuli* Inf. Div. - they were no tanks and with a few anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns. As Gen. Weninger said: *"We would like to implement the C4, but the differences between C2 and C4 are these:*

C2 takes place without tanks and without naval ships, "these means are indispensable for the C4"⁽³⁴⁾.

Except that a conversation with Mussolini at noon overthrew his purposes. Mussolini announced that Adm. Darlan had asked for help, for the moment aircraft to Germany and that, therefore, it was necessary to put a hand to C4 with the utmost urgency. C2 Nothing: Germany did not grant the permit. At 13:00 von Rintelen brought fresh news. The OKW was intent on offering the German aid to France if it was a defense against the Anglo-Americans. Otherwise, green light to Corsica.

Cavallero showed somewhat perplexed. The first case did not eliminate

the risk of the enemy to occupy the almost defenseless Corsica, with all the complications of the case. As for the C4, it could take two divisions, while Riccardi had promised to scrape together a minimum of naval support. However, the prospect that France into line with Italy and Germany opened rather rosy prospects:

"The French fleet is ready to get out of Toulon in an hour. I dare to hope, but if this collaboration happens we won the war (...). The situation in Libya is strenuous, but we can resolve it in this way. Of course if the enemy arrives in Tunisia, it becomes much more difficult" ⁽³⁵⁾.

The entire day of the 9th spent in the frantic preparation of the contingent to carry now in Tunisia and pending the outcome of the conference in Monaco, asked Hitler for an examination of the situation with political leaders of Italy (leaving Ciano, replacing Mussolini physically unwell) and France (Laval).

Reconsidered urgently the C4, was calculated that if absolutely worst (French resistance just symbolic, no breaks on the roads, but excluding landings in Tunisia) that the Allies reached the area of Bizerte-Tunis with two divisions not before the dawn of the 21st and with two other divisions not before 23-24 November. Transportation options allowed the Italian daily sending of 800-1500 men by air, 3,000 men and 250 vehicles by sea. Therefore, it was necessary to airlift a Bersaglieri regiment with two 20 mm. batteries to defend the Tunisian airports; send the convoy already prepared (III/92nd Infantry, 10th Bersaglieri, a 75mm. Smv. group, units of service and a share of Germans) for the occupation of the main positions; be followed, in echelons, in succession of the phases, the XXX Corps Command and their media, and then the *Piave* Mot. Div., the *Superga* Inf. Div. and *Livorno* Inf. Div.. According to the forecasts it would have landed a complete division to every four days.

Ciano arrived in Monaco to 22:00 and shortly after took place a first meeting between the Germans and Italians. The atmosphere was clearly agitated and just as clearly no one was great illusions about the likelihood that France sided with the Axis. An initial confused conversation, during which Hitler studied the situation in Africa on a map torn from a railway timetable and measured several times, using a piece of paper like a decimeter, the distance between Tunis and Rome, followed a long silence. Then Hitler shook from the reflections that had plunged abruptly and turned to Field Marshal Keitel: "*We are marching now on Corsica and France. When can you start?*". Keitel's response was immediate: "*Also now. Just give the order to attack. There is no thought of any serious resistance*"⁽³⁶⁾.

Based on this information, on November 10 the Comando Supremo

He decided the implementation of C2, which in any event was confirmed as always valid, for the next day. *"Of course - Cavallero telephoned von Rintelen - that if you were in the meantime the results [official] of the meeting of Monaco and if the OKW agreed it would be better. Then you would do the day after tomorrow. We will make the thing only if policy needs impose of it for tomorrow, but for the day after tomorrow we will be more prepared"*⁽³⁷⁾. Then he came to the conclusion that the final decision remained subject to the outcome of the meeting.

The trend of the conference was known that afternoon and is well described in the report submitted by Gen. Gandin, who had followed Giano:

"The Minister Laval began by singing the praises of the treatment used by the Germans to France under the armistice. Then goes on to represent the obstacle of the Italian claims to an eventual occupation of metropolitan territories and of French North Africa.

Hitler cut him off and invited him to respond immediately and categorically whether the French Government will allow landing points to the Axis troops in Tunisia. The prevarication and disquisitions of Laval, Hitler dissolved the session. Then called Marshal Keitel and orders him to prepare arrangements for the invasion of France from the day of 11 November, starting the movement now that will be agreed with by Italy, which will have to do likewise in metropolitan France, Corsica and Tunisia.

The urgency of such movements does not allow any delay. Marshal Keitel explained that if the Italian troops, given their constitution, they could not proceed rapidly, has already ordered that German armored units certainly proceed to the coast; German units fall within the line already set (Geneva-Lyon-Toulouse) with the progress of the Italian occupation (...).

Meanwhile, the Minister Laval, isolated in one of the rooms of Führerbau, asks to speak with Vichy but telephone communications are interrupted. His departure is scheduled for the next day on November 11th, at approximately 08:00. It is expected that at 7 am of the 11th, Minister Ribbentrop present Minister Laval, saying that the events are precipitated (...).

It should be added that the Minister Ribbentrop would intend to make an announcement to the world press, saying that the armed forces of the Axis came into France at the invitation of Laval. Minister Ciano pointed out that it was rather inappropriate.

Impressions.

Serious apprehension in the Führer and all the military leaders. Marshal Goering admitted that this is the first hard shot that the Axis had received.

Serious apprehension on the part of the population that watched the movements of the various delegations in front of the Quattro Stagioni hotel and in front of the Führerbau. Some greetings, no ovation to the same Goering, who normally receives very sympathetic.

I talked to the Führer, with Marshal Keitel and Jodl with General about the visit made on November 6 to Marshal Rommel. All unanimously have shown little eager to listen to serious news of the Italian-German Armored Army and Libya, expressing clearly not be fully included on the severity of the situation in the theater (...)"⁽³⁸⁾.

On the 11th, therefore, on the Italian side it was kicked off operations O (West = France), C2 and C4. The first units of the 4th Army (Gen. Vercellino) crossed the border at noon, landing in Corsica began in the afternoon.

That the different and contemporary initiatives, almost suddenly decided and implemented abruptly or almost, were held in the name of perfect regularity, no one could claim it. Of course, even if there were projects more or less detailed, it can grant that occur disrupted; However, the feeling one gets from the available documents that improvisation at the last moment has passed the guidelines⁽³⁹⁾.

The occupation of southern France, suffice it to say that at 08:30 of the 11th Cavallero told Mussolini of "*some delay*" by the 4th Army (the border had to be overcome at 07:00), so as to warn Ambrosio that "*Vercellino ran the risk of immediate dismissal.*" Knew, in the morning, from von Rintelen that German columns had already arrived in Lyon, Limoges and Vichy without encountering difficulties and that the protest of Mar. Petain had a character of pure formalities, Vercellino urged to push forward unscrupulously with all his elements rapid, stating that "*a systematic procedure would be the ruin of the enterprise.*" And the matter was resumed at 22:30: "*The concept is to go ahead. The projects must put them in the drawer. They are outdated. Now it goes in all directions (...). The Geneva-Lyon- Toulouse line is secured by the Germans. We have the means to go there (...). Put people on the railroad and march on Grenoble. The supplies are not to be of concern (...)*"⁽⁴⁰⁾. The fact is that very rarely large Italian units have owned the means of transport, the broadcasting system and the available tactics and logistics needed to act with audacity and strength required in the circumstances. And, let's face it, he lacked that special attitude to face the new and the unexpected that many times you've got to admire the German formations at different levels. Consequently, the aim was also achieved thanks to the good will and always assisted by good fortune, but the order and completeness desired.

The operation Corsica suffered, perhaps, a basic drawback: the reins were always held by the Comando Supremo to coordinate more quickly and more effectively the unity of the three armed forces involved in the expedition. At least in part this was necessitated by the situation, however, it does not seem unfounded regret of Gen. Caracciolo, commander of the 5th Army, when he learned (the 12th) that starts at zero hour of the 13th had to take responsibility for the island, including it as part of the defensive Tuscany and Elba: he would like to receive this task since before landing, said Cavallero. On the other hand it is easy to see how the person of the Chief of Staff General has found major efforts, involving as natural leaders of the GS of armed force, in particular executive of relative importance.

Since the autumn of 1940, the Command of the VII Corps was in charge of preparations for the eventual occupation of Corsica. Given the need for special training to landings, in collaboration with the Royal Marina, divisions *Friuli* and *Cremona*

were oriented to specific task and not diverted for the needs of the various theaters of operation. In February 1942, when the Comando Supremo instructed the Command of the VII Corps be at the head of operation C3 (Malta), the training was extended to the *ad hoc* divisions *Livorno* (located in the area of Bracciano) and *Superga* (area of Formia). Not being possible the simultaneous implementation of the two requirements, Corsica and Malta, due to inadequate methods of landing and maritime transport, the emphasis shifted to C3.

In connection with this decision, the VII Corps took command indicative of the XXX Corps (Gen. Sogno) and raised in Rome, in anticipation of moving to Sicily with Inf. Div. *Friuli*, *Livorno* and *Superga*. In Florence functioned a new Command VII Corps (Gen. Mondino), which remained in the employ of the *Cremona* and *Friuli* temporarily, until the *Bari* Inf. Div., destined to replace it, had not completed its preparation. With the abandonment of the C3, the XXX Corps was generally geared to the defense of the Tyrrhenian coast from Rome to Naples. But it would be wrong to consider it ready for use.

Let's start by saying that troops and corps services lacked almost entirely, having been assigned to the new VII Corp: for the XXX was expected that, at the time of emergency, drew on the 6th Army, in Sicily. Second, the three divisions, whose organic composition was more consistent and better than normal, had suffered harmful subtractions in favor of the Egyptian front. In the third place, the training for an operation of invasion is evidently very specific and not the most suitable for a utilization of undifferentiated units.

In practice, therefore, the VII and XXX Corps formed the reservoirs where the Comando Supremo was directed to draw for the chosen operation. Thus, the occupation of Corsica was assigned the VII Corps with the *Cremona* and *Friuli* (the *Bari* did not yet seem developed). So far, more or less it remained with the program. Things changed when it came to the issue of Tunisia.

"The proclamation of the Anglo-American landing in Algeria - wrote Gen. Sogno - required, by the Command of XXX Corps, in anticipation of the event. In line with strictly privacy and strictly forbidden to mention it to anyone, after it was suspended the operation of Malta, he had been referred to the commander of the corps that the Army would put to a proposed operational Tunisia, without, however, no reference was made on any presumptions of the Italian Supreme Command about the enemy initiative that, in fact, had to occur, let alone on the concrete measures that, in any case, should have been adopted and the possible participation in them of the XXX Corps.

On the other hand, then, the Italian offensive western Egypt had come up a short distance from Alexandria and the situation on the sea was considered to give to advance the preparations for the Operation of Malta, to put them almost to the point, at least, as reflected in the preparation of the army forces intended for landing: in any case, it was assumed that XXX Corps, only big units trained for such operations and available, could

be used in any operation that, in the situation, it was deemed necessary in the Mediterranean theater of war and, therefore, it was logical that the commander of the corps, on his own, he had collected the guides and monographs statistics that had been able to obtain .

Only a few days after the arrival of the news of the Anglo-American landing, he was given in the consultation, the commander of the corps, a shorter and more succinct than memory (a few typed pages) prepared by the operations department of the General Staff of the Army, which were briefly discussed, broadly speaking, the soil characteristics of the operating theater in Tunisia and eastern Algeria and the lines of the most important steps alleging from Tunisia to Algeria and was made an assessment of the forces that would could be used according to these lines, ascending to about eleven divisions, of which some armored, but not specifying how these forces could have been procured, indeed, doubting their availability, so that was expected of having to reduce the number, nor how it should arrange to provide transport and what measures would be done to be landed. The reading of the memorandum did not produce, then, any effect⁽⁴¹⁾.

Aside from the unpleasant finding of a study of all theoretical and completely divorced from reality, which force them to frantically replicate taken on the drum, immediately emerged an unfortunate misunderstanding, exaggerated in its consequences by Kesselring, but that could be avoided. The OBS had moved immediately. On November 8, he had sent a fiduciary to Tunis to prepare for the landing of German planes; the next day the Vichy government laid the Tunisian foundation to make it available to the Axis. The same November 9th fifty German aircraft landed at the airport of El Aouina, without question or difficulty on the French side, while the responsibility for beachhead was temporarily assigned to Col. Harlinghausen (the *Fliegerführer* Tunis), employed by the *Fliegerkops* II⁽⁴²⁾.

The 10th landed twenty Macchi 202 together with a contingent from the Luftwaffe. Which had taken place some agreement with the Germanic seems no doubt; but obviously it had taken place on the basis of an erroneous belief and not at the right levels⁽⁴³⁾. "*Contrary to specific agreements* [between the French and Germans, it should be understood] - claimed Kesselring - *and without me being informed, an Italian fighter squadron landed near Tunis*" and this caused a disturbance, rather than a reversal of the local psychological situation.

The fact is that Hitler had treated Laval without any concern for form, but moved very cautiously with the French military. Meanwhile asked Petain the consent of military occupation of Tunisia; then he made contact with the resident French General, Adm. Esteva; Kesselring then was appointed head of operations against the Anglo-Americans, directly responsible to OKW, avoiding, however, preventing him to go to scene. The Italian side had been kept on the sidelines, at least for the moment. And, apparently, the initial reports between French units and German paratroopers, sent first, were excellent. The unexpected arrival of the aircraft Italians aroused

instead an immediate and alarming hostile reaction, so that Kesselring immediately turned to Cavallero. It was conceivable with embarrassment that they had to explain to Mussolini, as, in contrast to the Germans, the Italian government had not announced the arrival of a formation in Tunisia and how the fact had caused the removal from the airfield of its commander in protest. Faced with this stance, the Duce authorized the return of the aircraft to Sicily. One such incident speaks for itself.

However, the whole problem of French North Africa was still in the air and Cavallero rightly complained to von Rintelen the lack of a concrete joint program of the Axis. The Comando Supremo did not know how many troops the OKW intends to allocate to the Algerian border and when they wanted to send them. Also he wanted to give precedence in the landing in Biserta - Tunis units to be started urgently to the ACIT. There were two divisions available, however need whether to carry both to Tunisia, or whether to give them to Bastico.

We reckon they had confused questions to Italy so important that it deserves a more prompt and independent decision. Instead, regardless of the terrible problem of overseas transport, the charge of unsatisfactory solution which seemed once again swinging between the poor organization and the undoubted difficulties load and escort, countermeasures resulted limited and disordered. The Command of the XXX Corp not had any interference in the provisions adopted gradually. The designation of units and their sequence in the movement were established between the Comando Supremo and the Army; indeed the first units not only did not belong to the corps, but even possessed a physiognomy organic, albeit temporary.

The only transport plan prepared at the request of the General Staff, the Command of the army corps, and also including the *Livorno* Inf. Div., it was not followed.

The 12th began the influx of German forces into Tunisia: two companies of the 5th parachute regiment and a regiment of 104th *Panzergranadiere*. Two days later it was the turn of the 11th Parachute Pioneers Battalion, a Recon group and a tank company, ie units made in bulk, drawing on what has been prepared for the ACIT. Almost at the same time, between the 14th and 15th, it took place the arrival of the first Italian contingent: 10th Bersaglieri, the III/92nd Inf. of the *Superga* Inf. Div., the CLVII 75mm. Semovente group of the *Centauro* Arm. Div., the IC and CXXXVI 47 mm. self-propelled anti-tank battalion by, these units stolen various large units.

From the other side, by landings from the sea and from the air the British 1st Army had extended its occupation to Bougie (11 November), Philippeville and Bona (12 November). On 14 January Anderson decided to try a card to the east. Relying on a minimum of cooperation

of the French hoped to invest Bizerte and Tunis in a week, thanks to the rapid conquest of some airport next to the two cities. A very complex operating design was at the time to be discarded because of the natural environment of ingrate (sketch n. 14).

It is appropriate, at this point, albeit a brief mention on the topography of the north-central Tunisia. The eastern foothills of the Atlas mountain system are grouped in Algeria in the surveys of the area of Souk Ahras and, somewhat farther south, in the mountains of Tebessa. The first continue with the mountains of Medjerda, narrow the gap between the Maas and the coast and sloping on Bizerte. The latter come in central Tunisia with the Great Western Ridge, about 500 meters above sea level, changes in the southwest-northeast and degrading of Tunis. It is a serious obstacle to the origins from the east or from the south and south-central trait is affected by four hills: Mahtar, Sbiba, Kasserine and Feriana.

From Grande Dorsale is detached, south of Pont of Fahs, the Dorsale eastern, about 150 km long. Even though its altitude roams only about 600-900 meters, it is a narrow mountain belt difficult to go. And in fact it exceeded by roads just four points: Djeloula and Fondouk in its northern part and Faïd and Maknassy in the south. Between the two backbones opens a semi-desert triangular plain.

The steppe zone of *chotts* separates the heads dotted the Tunisian south and goes down to the sea between the tapering Djebel Asker and Djebel Tebaga. At its eastern end is the small plain of Gabes, center of confluence of natural obstacles and communications throughout the region.

The general approach of the great communications Tunisia is obviously influenced both on the performance and characteristics of the surveys, is the need of internal traffic, direct to the ports of Tunis, Sousse and Sfax (Bizerte was essentially military port) and connected by large coast artery road to Gabes continues until Tripolitania. In particular, the two paved roads from Algiers submissions contained in northern Tunisia, the coastal (Algiers-Bougie-Philippeville-Bona-Bizerte) was narrow, with a succession of curves with small radius, so as to present difficulties for the transit of heavy vehicles. The other, more internal, followed the railroad-Costantina- Tunis and Algiers offered better conditions. But none of them could withstand the flow of a large volume of traffic. The land, hilly and broken, favored the defense at some bottlenecks, such as Bab el Medjez and Kasserine, and presented serious impediment to armored vehicles. To this was added the rains, notoriously normal from November to March, which would have made the feasibility difficult for even men and pack animals.

As a result, Anderson ordered that the *Hart Force*, a battlegroup based on the 5th *Northamptonshire*, it aimed at Djebel Abiod and the 36th Brigade to drive on Tabarka; that the 11th brigade and the *Blade Force*,

Schizzo n. 14

consisting of the 17th/21st lancers reinforced, they were moving along the direction Souk Ahras Souk- el Arba -Beja. At the same time the British I Paratroopers battalion was dropped on the airport of Souk el Arba and II/509th American paratroopers near Tebessa.

This advanced established two contacts, one with French and one with the Germans. On the 15th a liaison officer of the 36th brigade had gone to Beja for an interview with the Gen. Barre, top commander of ground troops in Tunisia, who had concentrated the bulk of his forces (six reinforced colonial battalions) in entrenchments Djebel Abiod - Beja - Medjez el Bab, gravitating on this last resort, very important to the road junction and the bridge over the river.

Barre was stalling. He was initially oriented to face the British and Americans; Then, on November 10, he had accepted the new directive of Darlan to "*cease fire on US forces and their allies*" and "*observe the strictest neutrality.*" But he had also received an order of Juin, very significant:

"The task of the troops of Tunisia unchanged against other foreign forces. In the event of hostilities by them, take all the measures to resist and cover communications with Algeria"
(44)

On 11 November, in the morning, he had received a telegram from Vichy announcing the imminent arrival of German forces and inviting the most rigorous neutral attitude, while in the afternoon he had been warned by Juin that according Darlan and Giraud, the occupation of Vichy France was a clear violation of the armistice and that, therefore, the Axis troops were to be regarded as enemies. On the evening of the 12th, finally, Juin telephoned still asking to provoke a *casus belli* with the Germans.

Barre had argued that its units were marching towards Beja: in other words, under the worst conditions to cause an accident, also for the fact that it's a special target for the overpowering *Luftwaffe*. It was not better, he suggested, save time and let the Germans were to start hostilities? Juin did not insist and Barre settled down to wait for the development of events, but collecting units in the area of Beja.

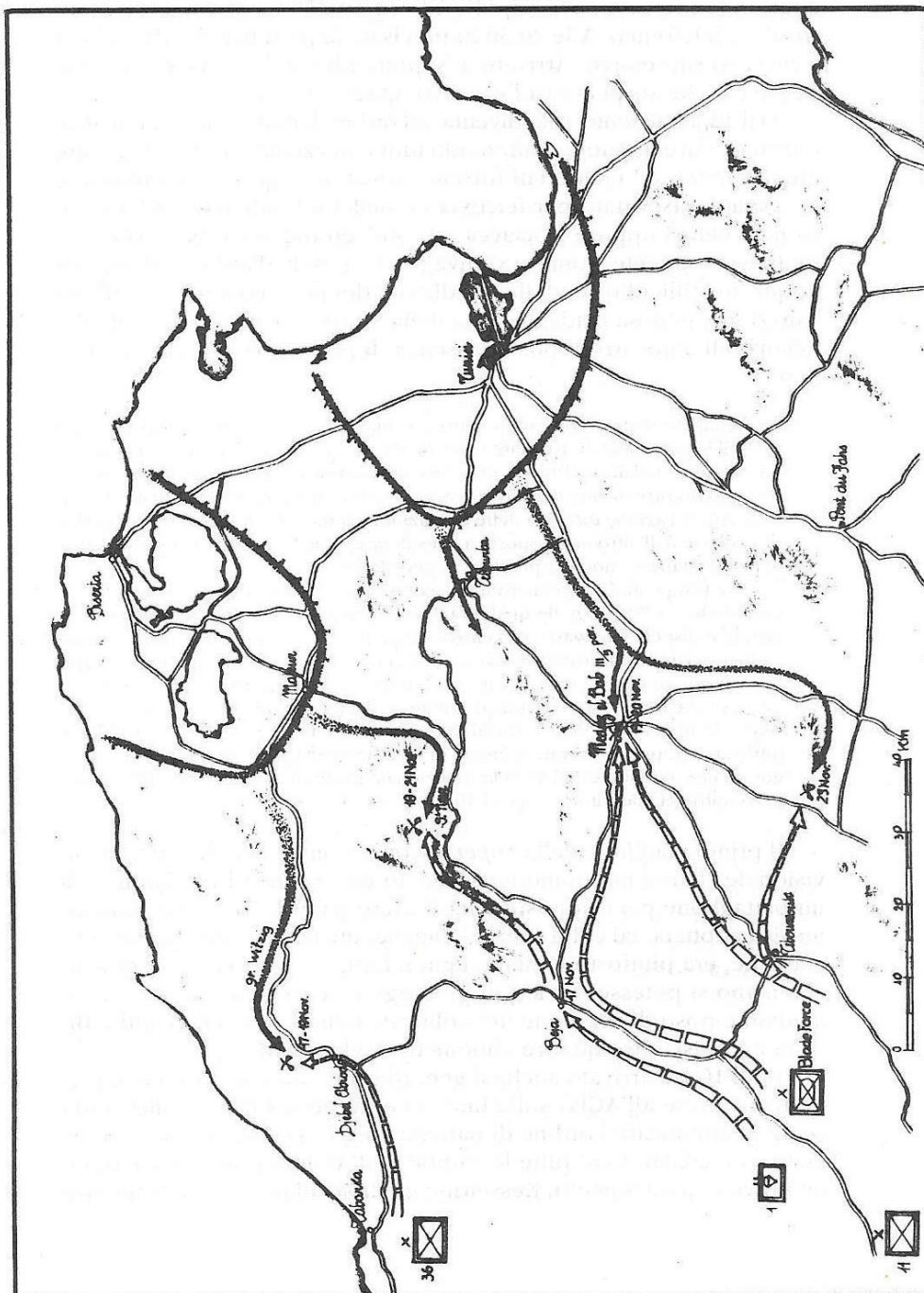
In this climate, the British began to push forward detachments. The *Hart Force*, passed Djebel Abiod, walked to the junction of Mateur however, attacked suddenly flowed back in disorder. At the same time a large patrol of the I Paratroopers Battalion, now incorporated in the *Blade Force*, went up to 25 kilometers from Mateur and stopped in Sidi Neir, after a skirmish with German mechanized elements. So on the evening of 17th the Allied situation in Tunisia was as follows: to the north, the 36th brigade in Djebel Abiod, the *Blade Force* in Beja and the 11th Brigade near Souk el Arba ⁽⁴⁵⁾; in the center the American II/509th Paratroopers in Gafsa (sketch n. 15).

Meanwhile *Superga* Inf. Div. (Gen. Lorenzelli) was slowly coming,

The first actions in Tunisia (17-23 November)

Schizzo n. 15

LE PRIME AZIONI IN TUNISIA
(17-23 novembre 1942)



after a slow rather cumbersome start. On the evening of November 9, the G.S. of the Army had ordered the commander of the infantry division (Gen. Benigni) and the 92nd Infantry should be ready to go. At 09:00 of the 10th the whole division was ordered to prepare to move to Naples by train. At 12:30 the same day, countermand by telephone. At 20:30 was clarified the departure of III/92nd for the next morning. Arrived in Naples, the battalion found a dispatch that it was suspending the boarding. This is the beginning.

By the 12th, finally, it is it come to pass orders of systematic movement, for subsequent parts, using all available means. Generally vehicles and materials were loaded in Naples and Taranto; personnel transported by rail to Palermo in Sicily and embarked on fast ships or in Sciacca and Castelvetrano on transport planes. Inevitably, as they did for the Germans, both resented the influx of this oozing both the requirements of the ports and airports of destination: painful inadequacy of anti-aircraft defense, absolute shortage of trucks in place, the absence of arrangements for the discharge.

"From the rushed and not preordained start - had to report to Gen. Sogno -and the inability to respect the organic constraints ensued a crisis of commands, and Italian units in Tunisia, since there, missing a chance to stop for the time required for the reconstruction, and the German command, which had given the action directive of operations, on the one hand pressed by operational needs and other ill- disposed to considered, objectively, the needs of the Italian troops, was not inclined to grant it.

Italian troops were deployed immediately, as and when they arrived and in the conditions in which they were transported: the units were broken up and dispersed in the vast operating theater, intermingled with those Germanic and separated from their services, with the consequence of a premature rapid wear (the only loss in men, occurring in November for army units, although they were not yet done tactical actions may arise, ascended to 17 officers and 336 non-commissioned officers and troops dead, wounded and missing and 192 NCOs and troops hospitalized in health care) is incompatible with the rigorous frugality that would have required our traditional non-wide availability and the serious difficulties of supply" ⁽⁴⁶⁾.

The first echelon of the *Superga* with the commander of the infantry division landed on the afternoon of the 16th and in the evening he was joined by a paratrooper Battalion of the R. Aeronautica. The concept of defense adopted by Col. Lederer, commander of the German land forces, was rather limited; in fact, he believed that with what at hand he could at best protect the small bridgehead of landing places through barriers, placed on the streets alleging to Bizerte and Tunis, at three or four kilometers from the villages.

But the 16th had arrived Gen. Nehring. Independently on the spot rushing to the ACIT, in the line of el- Agheila ⁽⁴⁷⁾, in Rome he had heard talk of the start order for Tunisia, where he assumed command of all Axis troops in place. The 13th, after a short introduction, Kesselring said roughly: "*For You will*

created the Command of the XC Army Corps. Until it is formed, he will be working as he can. At present there is a Chief of G.S. available. But there is an operations officer, Maj. Moli of the OKW". With this encouragement, Nehring flew to Bizerte on 14 November. He examined the situation, returned by plane to Frascati, new OBS headquarters, to report to Kesselring and to realize precedence over the reinforcements necessary. On the 16th he reappeared in Tunis and immediately pointed to Gen. Benigni that Italian troops had to be considered in his employment of use ⁽⁴⁸⁾. The rest were already there: in both cities the action was governed by German hands.

Nehring had received from Kesselring clear and ... frank guidelines: *"It is of utmost importance to advance westward to gain freedom of action. It is expected to reach more or less the Algeria-Tunisia border. The OKW and I hope you succeed in his task of keeping Tunis"*⁽⁴⁹⁾.

Nehring was convinced, therefore, that, in those circumstances, the best defense was attack. According to the confusing news reports, he was in favor of Bizerte which seemed more urgent buy breath. Therefore immediately he ordered the Witzig group⁽⁵⁰⁾ to head to Mateur on Tabarka rejecting, if possible, the enemy until Bona. The group moves immediately meeting the *Hart Force* and dispersed it, but the afternoon of the 18th he found himself suddenly in contact with the head of the British 36th Brigade, in Djebel Abiod. The fighting was fierce and stopped at dusk with the withdraw of the Italian-German group.

The continued influx of *Superga*. The 19th it was the turn of the division command, with the 92nd Infantry and the 5th field artillery. And that night came Gen. Gandin, sent by Cavallero to solve a new problem is presented to the Comando Supremo: the real prospect of a dangerous enemy push on Gabes and Sfax. If they achieved those objectives, Northern Tunisia - and with it all Axis troops landed to face the operation Torch - would remained isolated, with obvious serious repercussions on the possibility of resistance in North Africa.

All that remained was to rush to guard somehow central Tunisia. Kesselring ordered Nehring occupy Gabes and the II *Fliegerkorps* to survey the area. Cavallero ordered the dispatch of the 50th Special Brigade (Gen. Imperiali) for the organization of a sector Gafsa-Sfax-Gabes. The idea was to land troops directly in Sfax, with ships and aircraft, but, as considered available by Riccardi and Fougier, then had to be abandoned in favor of the influx of units from the north and south.

It was mentioned to the prevailing uncertainties at the start of the *Superga*. To these we must add that unfortunately the Special Brigade. Was studied in order to obtain a tool for fighting especially maneuverable and reactive⁽⁵¹⁾, even though under the pressure of events that did want quick action rather than on the basis of a certain conception of tactics.

Practically

it revolved around the armored Recon group (Reco) *Lodi* - units of new type and very vague guidance for use - which, however, already committed to the Comando Superiore of the Armed Forces of Libya, at Tripoli was just a small part. The bulk was still in Italy and only the evening of the 19th will leave Rome. In the aforementioned framework of irresolution appears significant story of Gen. Imperiali. Been notified, in Bari, to show up the 12th in Naples, where he would find orders for future use, he learned on arrival that his movement had been suspended. Presented himself in Rome, the General Staff of the Army, learned the cancellation of their boarding for Tunisia in command of the first group of troops. Back in Bari, Imperiali was soon joined by a new starting order. Landed in Bizerte on the evening of the 19th, he finally had from Gandin provisions about task and use. All without that the command of XXX body, predicated for the transfer in turn to Africa, were to know the sequence of orders and counter orders.

Thus, the brigade came to life with units assigned piecemeal, using some already engaged in Tunis and subtracting others from the *Superga* and the defense of the western Tripolitania. The end result will be a unit of physiognomy very different from that expected.

The Italian position was anything but pleasant to the French and the Germans. On formal "invitation" of Nehring, Lorenzelli had immediately issue instructions to units not to show the national flag, because they were guests. Actually, similar directive was also given to German units, but as far as we were concerned it was clear the intention to counter any possible Italian claim to the region, on the pretext of not hurting the French and to affect their cooperation, held - with excessive optimism, if not superficially - possible by most Germans.

Despite such hopes relations with the French were changing and not in the desired direction. In early frictions followed the incident of resolving Medjez el Bab. As we know, at this important crossroads Gen. Barre had concentrated the bulk of his forces. The German High Command asked the free passage on the early hours of the 19th, but Barre, whose political orientations were already defined, left unanswered the request. Kesselring, one of the few increasingly wary about the French attitude, then ordered the immediate intervention of the *Luftwaffe* and the III/5th Paratroopers. Barre retreated into the night on the 20th and the east bank of the Medjerda river was occupied by the Germans.

The relationship between Italy and Germany were not the best. This was due in large part by the situation itself, but certainly the character of Nehring not helped overcome the initial friction.

The commander of the XC Corp had articulated bridgeheads in three sectors. The northern one, or of Bizerte, was ruled by Colonel. von Broich and, in addition to the German units, included the 10th Bersaglieri, the III/92nd Inf.,

the CXXXVI anti-tank Battalion and DLVII 75/18 semovente group. The central or northern Tunis, was entrusted to Leut. Col. Koch, under whose orders were also the CI anti-tank Battalion and a company of the II/92nd Inf.. The southern sector, Tunis or south, was instead entirely Italian. The commander Gen. Lorenzelli, which provided the I/92nd Inf., the I anti-tank Battalion and I/5th Art. of the *Superga*.

This division allowed to Lorenzelli, who had received from Rome the general directive to take command of all the Italian units, to feel his action solely on the few troops under direct orders. They were so predictable, at that stage of piecemeal inflow of units, various drawbacks of organic character and logistics. To compensate, at least in part, in this regard, Lorenzelli left Gen. Benigni in Bizerte (where he commanded Col. Von Broich), but the occurrence of misunderstandings with Nehring was inevitable.

As for connections, the Comando Supremo detached from from the Command of the XC Corp its own organ, the *Coletun*, governed by Leut. Col. Broccoli, also responsible for transmitting Nehring's orders to Lorenzelli.

More days passed and more the problem of North Africa became tangled. Cavallero was convinced that the real issue was constituted by Tunisia, which losing all resistance in Libya was to become impossible. He felt the drama of lacking everything, even divisions, now that he had to imagine very consistent defense of the metropolitan area. For similar need, Ambrosio said necessary ten divisions and, at the idea of Cavallero to recall from Russia the Alpine corps, suggested, more radically, of including the entire ARMIR. The head of the G.S. General not bring himself to deal with Mussolini and the OKW on the subject, providing a negative response, and preferred to draw from the Balkans or even from France.

But apart from this, the transport situation showed no signs of improving with the beachhead of Tunisia, despite the high hopes placed in it. If the anti-aircraft defense of Tripoli appeared inefficient, those of Bizerte and Tunis, they were even less. The cycle of a ship trip to Tunis resulted in ten days; Tripoli could make one trip per month in large convoys. At night the enemy air attack was very strong and known uncontrollable, admitted Adm. Sansonetti, and the route to the west was under attack not only from Malta but also from Algiers. Sfax and Sousse they yielded very little and Biserta- Tunis did not have the capacity to feed two separate battlefields (Tunisia and Tripolitania). Moreover, there was to fear a further worsening of the circumstances within a couple of months.

Malta, in fact, no longer had to rely on isolated and uncertain supplies. The conquest of the airports of Cyrenaica made everything easier

the *Mediterranean Fleet*. The *Stoneage* operation led to the island convoy MW 13, consisting of four cargo ships. Although randomly spotted by a German Ju. 88. On 18 November and attacked immediately and the following day by the aircraft of the II *Fliegerkorps*, the convoy reached Malta unscathed overnight on November 20, due to bad weather but also to the continuous air protection offered by British fighter base in the island and Tobruk.

London for the successful *Stoneage* operation had vital character. The 19th assembled the Chiefs of G.S. just to assess the aid that Malta could provide the ongoing struggle in Tunisia. "*It all depends* – Gen. Brooke wrote in his diary - *on the possibility that the convoy to Malta arrive safe and sound and can be discharged*" ⁽⁵²⁾.

Supermarina had also expressed its thoughts on the island. According to the so-called "Plan Ana": "*The most important task that our naval forces are to perform in the central and eastern Mediterranean is the blockade of Malta*", but now it was stated that the intervention with naval units based in Naples and Messina was "*subordinate aerial efficiency of Malta*". In other words, no initiative was possible if not preceded by the neutralization of the island, neutralization reputed beyond the capacity of the Axis both from Kesselring and from Fougier. In short, the squaring of the circle.

That being the case, Riccardi did not feel like risking the fleet against the big British convoy and its escort. His explanation in front of the discontent expressed again from the OBS not appeared, in truth, very persuasive:

"In the particular case, albeit belatedly when there was a sighting of a convoy to Malta, one of the causes for the failure to intervene with the cruisers present at Messina was the absolute lack of destroyers"

Even Hitler was heard on the subject, while keeping it general. He complained in a personal letter to Mussolini slowness of supplies to Tunis and Tripoli, and Riccardi summoned back to signify the need for a "*powerful offensive action in depth*" against Malta, as the only valid way to counter British supremacy:

"It is certain – he came to say - that from now on it will not be possible to ensure the necessary **minimum** supply of the African armies, despite any sacrifice, if the Axis will not regain the air supremacy in the central Mediterranean, starting with a recovery effective action and continues on the bases of Malta "

He was at a standstill: Supermarina denied liability and claimed that the strategic junction fell within the jurisdiction of Superaereo and OBS; they shrugged their shoulders because with

Torch arms using aircraft and crew was approaching the maximum; the African armies desperately asking reinforcements and supplies because they had to fight against totally superior opponents. Unable to find a solution, the problem of Malta was simply set aside and the attention given to the ground plans.

On the night of 22 November, at his meeting with Riccardi and Fougier, Kesselring and von Rintelen, which were mentioned earlier, after a discussion on the conduct of operations by Rommel, Cavallero wanted to touch a fundamental question:

"We need food - he said - the two theaters of war. These two theaters are closely linked. We must realize that the effort you do for one of them does not damage the other. Better, to get right in the extreme case, we must ask ourselves: we must concentrate all of the effort in one direction and give to another? Of course it would be better to do in Tripolitania everything we said, but our conscience must be very clear on this point: if we were to focus our efforts in one direction, which is this question? Sure Tunisia. This brings us to the following question: think the Mar. Kesselring that the needs of Tunisia will allow us to do to Rommel's the least we said? If this is not, I want to know right away so I can adjust. "

Kesselring said that what existed in Tripolitania had to be considered in favor of the ACIT and that only a serious threat in the Tunisian arena could have led to touch the forces of Rommel to remedy it. "*In Tunisia - He explained - it is to gain time and the week.*" Cavallero drew the conclusions: the conduct of the war in the two North African theaters of war constituted a single operational problem. Put clear premise, that there remained "*follow hour by hour the progress of events*" and adjust to give a shot at the rim and a barrel. This, in essence, the guiding idea ⁽⁵³⁾.

As slow and irregular was the influx of Axis troops in Tunisia, even more slow and irresolute appeared in London the allied advance to Bizerte and Tunis. The diary of Gen. Brooke recorded daily concern for the insufficient speed of operations in French North Africa and the slowdown of the 8th Army's offensive in Cyrenaica. In his personal notes Brooke let out considerations criticism of the action of command:

"At that moment I began to feel rather uneasy about operations in North Africa. Eisenhower did not seem able to feel the need to go on Tunis before the Germans could organize their resistance. It was a time when daring and resolute action could achieve great results. Eisenhower (...) was too involved in the political problems of the situation. He would have to leave to his deputy, Clark, the task of handling and devote himself fully to the tactical problems (...).

We have to remember that Eisenhower had never commanded a battalion in action even when he found himself - head of a army group in North Africa.

It's no wonder he did not know what to do and allow it to be absorbed by the political situation at the expense of the tactical. I had little confidence that he could solve skillfully and the military situation he faced and gave me so much anxiety (...). He learned many things during the war, but the tactics, the strategy and the command were never his forte "⁽⁵⁴⁾.

But probably the key point was different: a bolder plan, namely the extension of the landings to Tunisia, he would get that quick success so desired.

On the evening of the 9th Gen. Anderson had taken over from Gen. Ryder in command of the *Eastern Task Force*, but limiting his authority to the British troops in the process of landing. As of November 24 could have just a few and incomplete units: the 78th Inf. Div. (Gen. Eveleigh) with the 11th and 36th Inf. Bd. and some divisional units; the 6th Arm. Div. (Gen. Keightley) with two tactical groups of the 26th Arm. Bd. and two battalions of the 38th Inf. Bd.; the 1st Airborne Brigade with three battalions; some supports of various weapons and finally, as a reinforcer, a couple of tank battalions, the I/1st *with* Stuart and II/13th *with* Grant. But Anderson knew that London was pressing the earliest opportunity in taking the momentum toward the east, and estimated the power and duty to use his strength for a vigorous push on Tunis. The 78th Inf. Div., which basically brought together almost all of the advanced units, was in charge of this task. Gen. Eveleigh therefore ordered the 36th Brigade to resume movement on Mateur, the *Blade Force* to focus on Djedeida (north-west of Tunis) and to the 11th Brigade to occupy Medjez el Bab.

On the 25th the three formations moved. The 36th Brigade beat and repulsed two detachments of the Axis, but made little headway; the 11th had to resist the intent after a fierce battle began before dawn and lasted throughout the day; instead the *Blade Force* had an unexpected success. Its *Derbyshire Yeomanry* with armored cars and American I/1st Arm. broke into the flat of Tunisia, over Tebournia, trouncing a German recon group, reaching the Djedeida airport, destroying 17 Stuka on the ground and damaging another twenty. It was enough to shake and indeed Nehring shivered in the night and he abandon the key post of Bab el Medjez.

"*In the throes of an understandable excitement* - he then told Kesselring - *General Nehring called me on the phone, taking the darkest consequences from events. I did not share his fears, I tried to calm him and I announced my arrival for the next day*" ⁽⁵⁵⁾. Nehring who had more than one probable cause of acute pessimism can understand, bearing in mind that Djedeida, the base of the *Stuka*, was located about twenty kilometers from Tunis; that the British threat to Mateur was increasing in intensity; and that, far to the south, the Italian 50th Special Brigade was scattered over an area too wide for its ability to control. After all just look at the map of the entirety of Tunisia to realize with horror that, two

weeks after its establishment, the beachhead of the Axis still looked more or less the same. But Kesselring was truly a leader of high level and was able to maintain a full coldness of reasoning: in an environmental situation far from clear, the Anglo-Americans had their own fish to fry and certainly wanted to avoid any reverse. On the other hand, the relevant distances in unfamiliar terrain, mountainous and dangerous, they could not represent a significant delay element, while allowing the re-commissioning of the railway. So, at least temporarily, an operation seemed unlikely in style, the only real danger. By contrast, it was necessary to take for granted strong enemy push, suggested also by the weakness of the Axis definitely known. This thought Kesselring. However, two issues demanding urgent action: Nehring not looked at and the Axis forces had to be increased and soon. He turning to Hitler he called for the establishment of a High Command, and found consensus and support.

The last days of November saw a succession of British efforts, after a rehash of the columns. The 36th Brigade, after a tiring advanced under the *Stuka* raids, launched an attack on the first circle hilly west of Mateur (28 November) and was bloodily rejected; a second effort, held two days later, did not produce better results. The 11th Brigade, occupied Medjez el Bab, tried to build on the success reported at Djedeida but was driven back by a heavy German counterattack. Raid entrusted to II Parachute Battalion and the American 56th Recon Regiment the airfield of Oudna, south of Tunis, ended in failure and heavy losses (sketch n. 16).

Now, for the scarcity of troops that Nehring still had, no Allied coup could any longer hope to be successful. Among the more Germanic arrivals there were two battalions of 5th Paratroopers, the Barenthin Glider Regiment, three battalions of travel, one of the broadcasts, with twenty 88 mm. artillery pieces. And also the parts of the 190th and 501st Tank Battalions and 7th *Panzer* Regiment, with a total of fifty Pzkw III and IV Special and four 56 ton *Tiger*., armed with a piece of 88, the first units on the African theater.

The Italian side had landed the *San Marco* regiment of the R. Marina, of two battalions, and other units of the *Superga*: the II/91st Inf., The entire 92nd Inf., The I anti-tank battalion and a company of the CXXXIII, the bulk of the 5th Artillery.

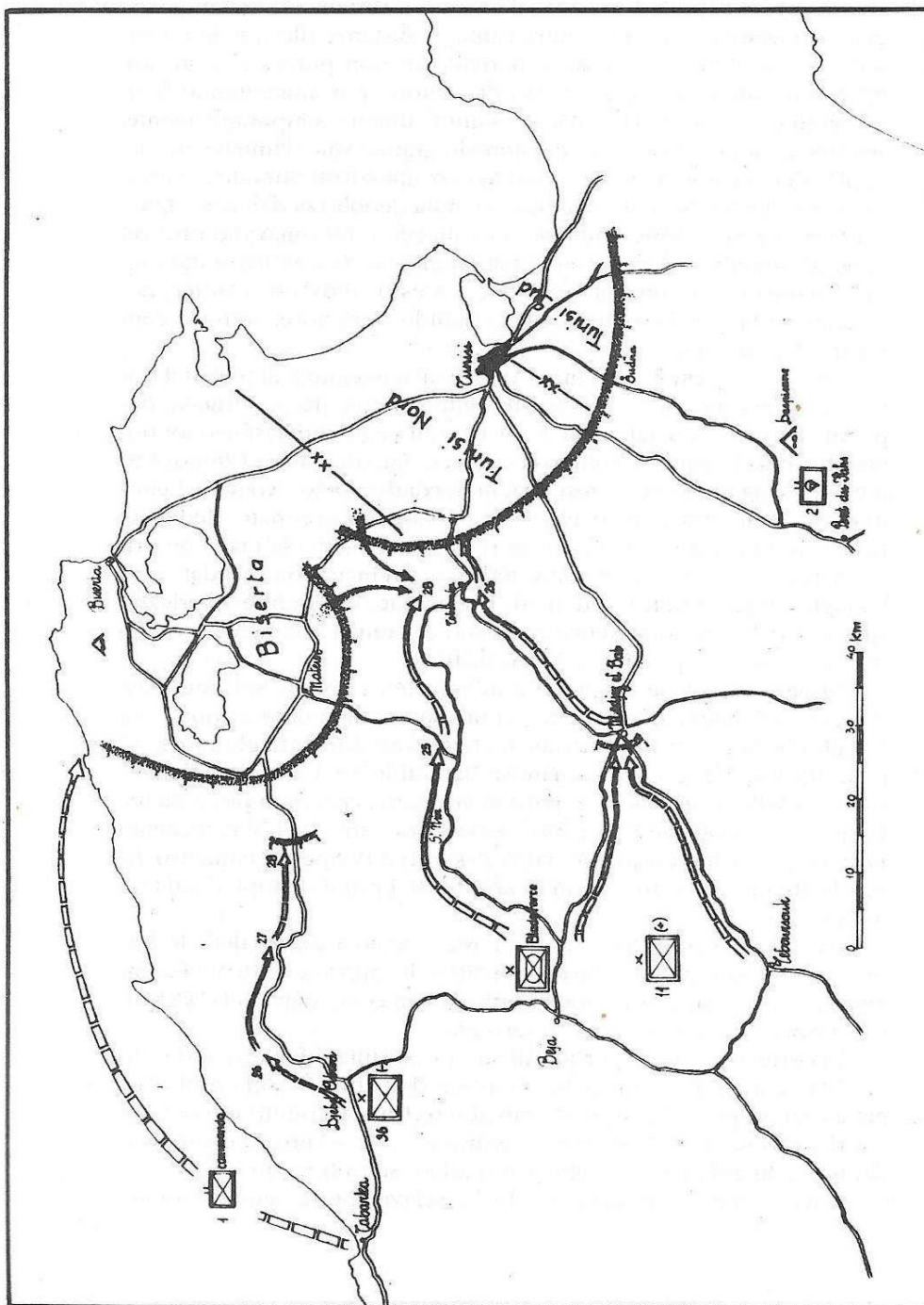
It was therefore necessary, for the Allies, be on the defensive, taking advantage of the hilly and broken terrain, waiting for the influx of army corps and a more robust air support. One important point had been in British hands, Mediez el Bab, and the error committed by the Germans abandoning it would not be repaired.

Where really the tactical picture left open all possibilities

The beachhead of the axis in Tunisia (25-30 November)

Schizzo n. 16

LA TESTA DI SBARCO DELL'ASSE IN TUNISIA
a fine novembre



was central Tunisia, a kind of no man's land, and this was true for both the warring parties. Since the 14th Gen. Welvert, commander of the Constantine division, had prompted a strong detachment at Tebessa, but the situation was confused and all the French garrisons of the south were withdrawn. On the 16th, the entire division was collected in Tebessa and a pair of motorized squadrons had gone up to Gabes without encountering units of the Axis. In the following days, however, the first clashes occurred and the two squads retreated on Sbeitla and Gafsa, while the assets of the first group of American paratroopers on airfield Gafsa. Fearing fact incursions from the south-east against the badly rear guard of 78th Inf. Div., the British and Americans tried to exercise some control from Tebessa to Gafsa with the II/509th Paratroopers, reinforced with other elements.

The Axis, on the other hand, as already said felt the danger, but then the pace of landings from Italy had initially left somewhat to be desired, could not accomplish much, at least with the speed desired. Gandin had brought order to entrust to the 50th Special Brigade organization of the vast central area. A truck column set off from Tunis in the early hours of the 21st to "*outrun the Anglo-American*" ⁽⁵⁶⁾. In Sfax, where it arrived in the afternoon, it was reinforced with the bulk of the II/92nd Inf. and a German company.

Gen. Imperiali is known from the very beginning, but the structure of the "coastal area" was necessarily very wide mesh: a detachment settled in Sbeitla, just evacuated by the enemy, Sousse was occupied by the II/91st Inf., Sfax from various units. More or less, that was all. The distance by road between the towns were translated into 165 km between Sbeitla and Sfax, 105 km between Sbeitla and Kairouan and 140 between Kairouan and Sfax.

From Tripolitania was indeed coming the Reco *Lodi*. With Italian-German elements were occupied Gabes (18 November) and Gafsa (21 November). With this, the front of the brigade surpassed the 350 kilometers wide. And so, inevitably, some enemy initiative could soon succeed: On November 22 Gafsa returned into the hands of French-Americans and the following day it was the turn of Sbeitla.

NOTES TO CHAPTER II

- (1) The operation *Bolero* in preparing for the opening of a second front in Europe and was the basis for the subsequent operation *Round-up*. That the invasion of France, then called *Overlord*. However, often the conventional name *Bolero* was used as extensively as one *Round-up*.
- (2) *Gymnast* was the naming convention for the landing in French North Africa. To be exact, when American decided to participate in the British plan, the operation was called *Super-gymnast*, but in current usage remained *gymnast*.
- (3) Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The papers of, The War Years*, Vol. I, The J. Hopkins Press, Baltimore and London 1970, p. 347.
- (4) Winston Churchill, *World War II*, part IV, vol. I, Mondadori, Milan 1951, pp. 440-441.
- (5) *Ibid*, p. 444.
- (6) *Ibid*, Part IV, vol. II, Mondadori, Milano 1951, p. 35.
- (7) *Ibid*, p. 36.
- (8) Basil Liddell Hart, *Storia militare della seconda guerra mondiale*, Mondadori, Milan 1970, pp. 436-437.
- (9) W. Churchill, op. cited above, pp. 44-47.
- (10) D. Eisenhower, op. cited above, p. 436.
- (11) Michael Howard, *Grand Strategy*, Vol. IV, H.M.S.O., London 1972, pp. 597 et seq.
- (12) The Americans considered the Regimental Combat Team (regimental combat group), or a tactical grouping of three battalions of infantry or tanks, a group of artillery and smaller units. The British had the Brigade Group (group of brigades), that is brigades plural, which for brevity will simply call the brigade.
- (13) Mark W. Clark, *the 5th US Army*, Garzanti, Milan 1952, p. 48.
- (14) W. Churchill, op. cited above, p. 144.
- (15) *Ibid*, p. 158.
- (16) M. Clark, op. cited above, p. 56.
- (17) The main categories of ships and landing craft, converted or purpose-built for the specific needs, were five. The *Landing Ship Infantry* (LSI), or the ship for landing infantry, and cargo vessels carrying the American combat strike force to the point where the landing craft were lowered into the sea. The landing craft to transport the 'waves' were distinguished as *Landing Craft Assault* (LCA) for the assault, the *Landing Craft Vehicle* (CLV), or Landing Craft Personal (LCP) for vehicles or personnel, *Landing Vehicle Tracked* (LVT) for tracked vehicles. Ships and landing craft to unload tanks and vehicles directly on the beaches distinguishable as *Landing Ship Tank* (LST) and *Landing Craft Tank* (LCT). The means to be used for unloading ships were the *Landing Craft Mechanized* (LCM). Finally there were the *Landing Craft Support* (LCS) for the support of fire during the landing.
- (18) George Howe, *The Mediterranean Theater of Operations, Northwest Africa: Seizing the Initiative in the West*, Office of Military History Department Army, Washington, 1970, p. 4.
- (19) M. Clark, op. cited above, p. 72.
- (20) *Ibid*, p. 90.
- (21) *Ibid*, p. 93. Liddell Hart said: "The diplomatic prelude to landings was a kind of mixture of western elements and elements from the story of espionage, all seasoned with comic interludes, transposed into the field of history "(Military History, cit., p. 445).
- (22) In the report held before boarding, Patton had said ironically that all landing plans would go to hell "*in the first five minutes*," and then he added: "*In the history it has never happened that the navy has landed a ground force at the time and place set. But if we disembark at no more than 80 km from Fedala and with no more than a week late compared to D-Day, I will go back and win*" (B. Liddell Hart, Military history cit., P. 451).

- (23) Darlan fell from the clouds when he learned of the landings. "*I knew long ago exclaimed - that the English are stupid, but I had always believed that Americans were smarter. Now I begin to believe that you do not commit fewer errors than them*" (B. Liddell Hart, Military history, cit., P . 459).
 - (24) W. Churchill, op. cited above, p. 254. The phrase took over a piece of a personal letter from Churchill to Roosevelt on 17 November.
 - (25) Louis Koeltz, *Une campagne que nous avons gagnée*. Tunisie 1942-1943, Hachette, Paris, 1959, pp. 34-40.
 - (26) USSME, Minutes of meetings held by the Chief of Staff General, vol. III, Rome 1985, p.880.
 - (27) Then the command submarines ordered taking the following dispositions: two boats in the forward position to the south of the Balearic Islands, six north of Bizerte and fifteen at the Gulf of Philippeville.
 - (28) *Diary Cavallero*, date 11/06/1942. The Royal Marina carried out between October 30 and November the 8 laying a barrage of mines in the Strait of Sicily, using 17 light ships.
 - (29) The Italian fleet could count a total of six battleships, 8 cruisers, 21 destroyers and 39 submarines available, but, apart from the fact that only with modern battleships and submarines would be possible to counter the enemy in large distances from the ground, the fuel oil situation construed an insuperable constraint.
- In this regard, the Adm. Weichold dropped a "*we both blamed to have wasted 50,000 tons. fuel oil for other purposes*". Cavallero said turned out to be no such a thing, and added: "(...) *on the other hand the Comando Supremo, although there had been diverted 50,000 tons., It would not have responsibility for the thing until recently was in the hands of AGIP and of Corporations. So [our] minds are right.*" It seems difficult to argue convincingly similar type of reasoning (*Diary Cavallero*, date 11/07/1942).
- (30) Enno von Rintelen, Mussolini's ally, Corso, Rome 1952, p. 169.
 - (31) Do not forget that the *Seekriegsleitung* 10/21/1042 (Directorate of Naval Operations) had replied to a request for reinforcements and revolt by Adm. Weichold.: "*A substantial increase of the German forces of land, air and sea in the Mediterranean is not expected due to the situation in other theaters of war. It is also impossible, for the moment, the supply of the fleet and the Italian Air Force because of the situation of raw materials, which is common to Italy.*"
 - (32) A. Kesselring, op. cited above, p. 143. In the range of possible interventions as a result of opening new theaters of war by allied beneficiaries included the occupation of the Balearic Islands, developed as a reaction to an Anglo-American landing in the Iberian Peninsula. The assumption of an enterprise without contrast, is considered a sufficient corps of two divisions and supports, but without the help of landing troops. Since it did not seem convenient to use the expeditionary force prepared for C2 (Corsica), it had to draw on a few large units planned use for C3 (Malta) or C4 (Tunisia): then the XXX Corp with the *Livorno*, and *Sabauda* Inf. Div. and supports.
 - (33) *Diary Cavallero*, 11.08.1942.
 - (34) *Ibid.*
 - (35) *Ibid.*
 - (36) Leonardo Simoni, *Berlino, ambasciata d'Italia*, 1939-43, Migliaresi, Rome, 1946, p.287.
 - (37) *Diary Cavallero*, date 11/10/1942.
 - (38) *Ibid*, date 11/11/1942. In Monaco, the Germans seemed "*definitely lose their heads*" in the face of confusing news from the Mediterranean: Adm. Darlan passed to the British, the Americans landed in Corsica. But even Ciano was not joking: "*We're finished - he exclaimed -and the Germans still do not realize it. They died of fear but do not believe in defeat. In April, the allies will be in Italy and we will pay for all*" (L. Simoni , op. cited above, p. 288).

- (39) The Comando Supremo ordered Supermarina at 15:40 for the simultaneous execution of emergencies Corsica and Tunisia. For the short notice, the Royal Marina was caught engaged in a major N.A. supply operation (Six convoys with twenty escort ships).
- (40) *Diary Cavallero*, date 11/11/1942.
- (41) Report of Gen. Sogno, *Il XXX colpo d'armata italiano in Tunisia*, USSME, Rome 1952, pp. 48-49.
- (42) As of November 10, the availability of the *II Fliegerkolps* amounted to 445 aircraft, while the transport aircraft of the OBS were 673.
- (43) The *diary Cavallero* reports these notes:
 “Nov. 9, at 19:00. -Telephone Ecc. Fougier. Topic: agreements with Marshal Kesselring to send our group to Tunisia. It says that you must tighten in and act simultaneously. He must maneuver with skillful and energetic go below Kesselring. In groups of Kesselring must be entered our, I arranged with Kesselring. OBS was commissioned by the Duce to act for the Italian air force and therefore must be overcome any reluctance by Kesselring.
- November 10, 9 am - Mussolini Telephoned asking the news. Answer (...) press about permission to bring our aircraft arrived in Tunisia last night. Now we await only the indication of the fields that are made available to us (...)”.
- In press in question has not been recovered track, so you are not able to identify any error of interpretation.
- (44) L. Koeltz, *op. cited above*, p. 65.
- (45) Souk el Arba had concentrated the grouping of French Col. Lorber, composed of troops of the division of Constantine (I/3rd Tirailleurs Algerians, II/15th Tirailleurs Senegalese, III/67th artillery of Africa and a motorcyclists squadron).
- (46) report in Gen. Sogno, *cit.*, P. 23.
- (47) On 9 November, Gen. Nehring, convalescent hospital in Wunsdorf as a result of the wound received in the arm on August 31 in North Africa, he was called by telephone from Berlin. It was in Gen. Gause, Chief of the G.S. of the ACIT, also convalescing in Germany, due to illness, he wanted an interview mandated by the OKW.
- Nehring went immediately to Berlin and, faced with the question if he felt in terms of return to Cyrenaica to cure the organization of a defensive position in Marsa el-Brega, he decided to take the job, though still not fully healed.
- (48) Only 2 December the Command of the *Superga* receive from Rome confirmed that all Italian troops in Tunisia were placed in the dependency for the use of Gen. Nehring.
- (49) Volkmar Kuhn, *Mit Rommel in der Wüste* (With Rommel in the desert), 2nd ed., Motorbuch Verlag, Stuttgart 1975.
- (50) The Witzig group had mixed composition. German units were pioneers the 11th paratroopers battalion, a tank company, a field battery. The Italian troops were the 2d company of CXXXVI Battalion. smv. Of 47 and DLVII group smv. of 75/18.
- (51) The 50th Brigade was originally to be special ordered the brigade command, a company Bersaglieri motorcyclists, the armored Recon. Group *Lodi*, the XV Tank Battalion., a group smv. Of 75, a mot. group by 75/18, a mixed engineer company, parts of the services.
- (52) A. Bryant, *All'attacco*, Blackwell 1966, pp. 480-481.
- (53) *Diary Cavallero*, date 11/22/1942, at 22:00. In fact, the conceptual approach of the conduct of the war in Africa does not seem very effective.
- (54) A. Bryant, *op. cited above*, pp. 481-482.
- (55) A. Kesselring, *op. cited above*, p. 148.
- (56) The column consisted of a company of 10th Bersaglieri motorcyclists, one of the II/92nd Inf., one of smv. cc 47, a battery to be 75/18 and a section 20.

Chapter Three

THE ABANDONMENT OF TRIPOLITANIA

1. THE WITHDRAW ON THE BUEBAT LINE (December 1942).

Rommel returned to Africa on 1 December very upset. Had formed the belief of having to rely on his strength and thought sadly that "*would have required the utmost skill to prevent any order that would lead to the foolish annihilation of the Army*"⁽¹⁾. He did not hide to his aides the disappointment for lack of sensitivity shown from the OKW about the plight of the ACIT and this worsened the psychological climate. But, according to his recollections, there was something to the new, much more important.

He was struck by the attitude of Goering against the Comando Supremo. The line of conduct imposed by the OKW the German generals tended to abstain from harsh highlight on the drawbacks in the Italian armed forces and seek changes to the usual practice. In other words, it was intended to avoid unnecessary injuries to the self-respect to its ally when the facts of the armament and the available resources and general organization appeared not editable. Of course, both Kesselring and Rommel more than once had formulated remarks, justified or not, on certain issues and just as naturally Cavallero, Bastico and Barbasetti had welcomed or not the criticism, as appropriate and in any case with balance.

However, arrived in Rome, Goering had performed with a coarseness and a lack of sensitivity toward Cavallero to impress even Rommel, whose touch could not be called exemplary. Such a way of making the *Reichsmarschall*, clumsy and futile, certain considerations undoubtedly circulating among the Germans, and perhaps some hints caught here and there within the Italian Rommel led to serious conclusions:

"Many Italians felt deeply the artificiality of the Axis and, therefore, believed that the ultimate success we would have had very little regard for their interests.

The general opinion was that if Tripolitania was lost, Mussolini would have been threatened by a political crisis in Italy. Its location was probably even more shocked by the sudden and heavy intervention of Goering. A majority of Italians had had enough of the war and was reflecting on how best to get out of it "⁽²⁾.

Just assumed the command of the army, Rommel suspended goodwill and the use of non-motorized troops in the line and asked for a conference with Bastico. He knew he needed a clarification and an agreement, at least in principle, to do. The strength of the ACIT

To 1st December (sketch n. 17) reached the total of 83,000 combatants, including 33,000 Italians and 50,000 Germans (including 2,500 men of the 1st *Luftwaffenjägerbrigade* and 6,500 of the 19th *Flak Div.*). Availability amounted to 42 medium tanks Italian and 54 German; 21 light tanks or Italian armored cars and 25 German; 179 pieces of 47 and 225 Italian field artillery of various calibers and 162 anti-tank pieces (of which 48 of 88 mm.) And 69 Germans field pieces of various calibers. The remaining facilities were 0.5 *unfoc*, 1.5 day of scarce fuel and 4 days of food. For motor vehicles, a complete tally made by the Comando Superiore indicated 3,700 efficient vehicles available and just over 1,500 inefficient. The Germans could count, according to a statement by Kesselring, 10,000 efficient means ⁽³⁾.

On the morning of 3 December, on the airfield of Tamet, west of Sirte, the two marshals met. Rommel began quietly, attributing his sudden departure to the need to personally represent the Führer the difficult supply situation and concluding that "*in Europe no one can imagine what it means to be in Africa without fuel. Today, if I were given the order to attack the enemy vanguards, I would not be able to do so because the tanks are out of fuel.*" However, it was necessary to make a fire with wood that was not there. He exhibited a heartfelt calculation of vehicles and petrol which could be counted and dates when they would be available; a calculation literally desperate. Suffice it to say that he adapted to accept as valid assumptions a daily consumption of fuel for the army of 400 tons when moving and 200 if only for supplies ⁽⁴⁾. At that time, the British 30th Corp, so that was massing in front of the positions of Marsa el-Brega, received daily about 1,000 tons of gasoline from Tobruk.

Ultimately the program, to which all agreed, established a guideline:

- on the night of the 6th (with the hope that the enemy, which were in contact the 51st Inf. Div. and 7th Arm. Div., Would not attack first): beginning of the retreat on the Buerat line of the first group of *La Spezia* and the 164th Light Div. (4,700 men);
- Following nights: second echelon of *La Spezia* and then the *Giovani Fascisti* and *Pistoia*, also on two occasions;
- Withdraw the XXI Corp (26,500 men), Would begin the evacuation of the warehouses and stores of Intendenza, which location was affected by the initial intention to resist to the bitter end on the line of Marsa el-Brega;
- The DAK (22,000 men), The 90th Light (5,500 men), The 1st *Luftwaffenjägerbrigade* (2,500 men), The Menton KG (1,300 men) And the XX Corp fighting group would form the rearguard, with the task of make a gradual fighting retreat;
- The garrison of Marada had to be recovered, together with the units in the Sahara.

As for the new position, Rommel noted with satisfaction that one of the Italian projects was almost identical to the German one. "*It would seem copied!*" He exclaimed. In principle, the safety line

Schizzo n. 17

The map depicts the Matruh region in Egypt, showing the Mediterranean Sea to the north and the Matruh Gulf to the east. Key locations marked include Matruh, Sidi Barrani, and the Matruh-Ghazal road. Military positions are indicated by symbols: a large 'X' for a main position, a circle with 'XX' for a secondary position, and a circle with 'DAK' for a specific unit. The map also shows the Matruh-Ghazal road, the Matruh-Ghazal road, and the Matruh-Ghazal road. A scale bar at the bottom indicates distances from 0 to 60 km.

followed the *wadi* Bei el-Chebir; the position of resistance was held on the large irregular semicircle Maaten Giaber-Gheddahia-Ras el Bagla, with a wing to support at Bu Ngem (sketch n. 18).

Of course the new defensive system meant the renunciation of all the territory east of the Libyan Sahara and the use of track-Buerat Gheddahia-Bu Ngem -Hon, normal supply channel for the deployed troops in the desert. He did not want to proceed with the eviction of Hon, as might have been, because it was the logistics base - operational of the entire Sahara. It was decided, therefore, always hoping the predicted influx of reinforcements such as to restore the situation, to keep changing its appearance from "fort" of the Libyan Sahara into the cornerstone of advanced point between the deployment of the ACIT and the arrangements in place in Fezzan, from Gath to Sebha. As a consequence it was necessary to proceed to the organization of a new axis of supplies and evictions from Garian for Mizdâ ed esc-Sciueraf, to Hon ed Sebha.

The logistical problem appeared to approximate solution. The bodies of services intended for the XX and XXI Corps were now controlled by the delegation of Intendenza east (Leut. Col. Soldani) and their deployment was based on the three logistics centers, including organs of hospitalization and care, ed -Agheila, en-Nofilia and Sirte. If the constitution of these logistics centers had proved a little tiring, the adjustment required in the circumstances was even more difficult, having to cater to traveling using the same vehicles for the transport of infantry. However, the bulk of the delegation of Intendenza east settled down in the area of Misrata, leaving a logistics center near the advanced tactical device. As already mentioned, the lack of available materials generated a very sensitive crisis, because the ordinary supplies from Italy were well below the minimum requirements, so as to reduce the already frighteningly poor stock levels.

But the major concern of Bastico and Rommel concerned the Tunisian theater. For both perspectives to the west they seemed much more dangerous than those in the east, and the position of Gabes, where they were the few troops of Reco *Lodi*, appeared vital (5).

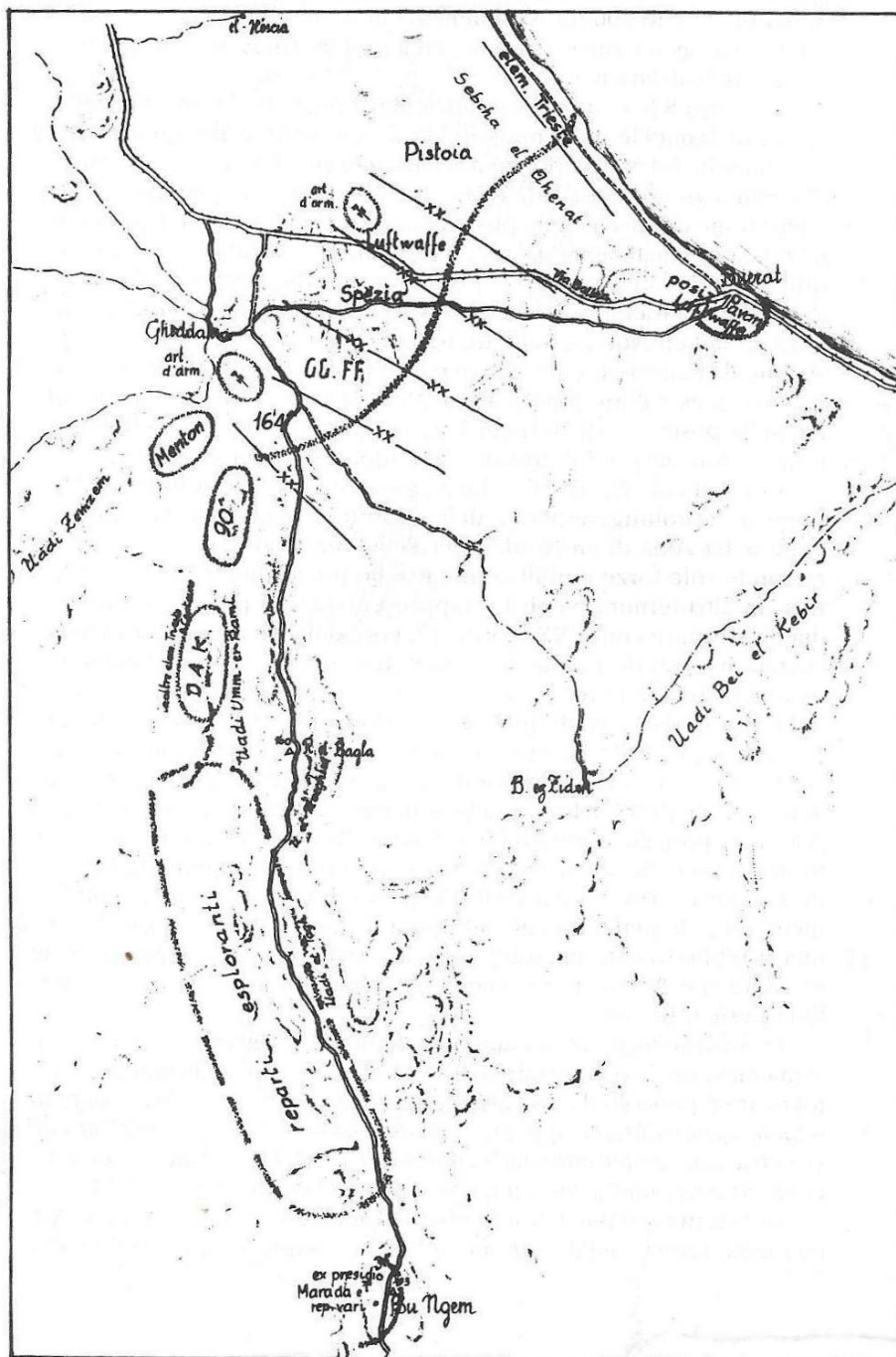
Rommel did not miss the opportunity to insist again on the opportunity to bring together all the Axis forces in Tunisia and act on interior lines. *"Otherwise - he said - put us on the ground here and there. I would be grateful if you would Excellency represent this my opinion, also with regard to the air force. It is a matter to be resolved, otherwise we have a not long life"*⁽⁶⁾. Bastico agreed: "in Full", but more likely to cut short than conviction. In fact, he had to feed many doubts about everything: the real possibility of power of resistance in Tripoli and the viability of a firm based in Tunisia.

When the accounts are made to go with optimism and on the basis

The schematic organization of Buerat

Schizzo n. 18

ORGANIZZAZIONE SCHEMATICA DELLA POSIZIONE DI BUERAT



of barely plausible minimum, it takes little to embarrass a practical choice. In the first four days of December the British sank five ships, which caused an immediate crisis and led Rommel to claim the urgent supply by air of at least 100 tons gasoline daily, giving up weapons, ammunition and other material, and to delay the start of twenty-four hours of the retreat.

On the 8th the situation was rather confused and under the sword of Damocles of the impossibility to move. At Buerat was the Command of the XX Corp, controlled by the interim command of Gen. Biton ⁽⁷⁾, with the bulk of the *Trieste* Inf. Div. (Gen. La Ferla), engaged in the defense system of the position, along with the 164th Light Div., interim commanded by Colonel. Westphal. The XXI Corp Navarini was diluted along the coast: the *Pistoia* Inf. Div. (Gen. Falugi) at the Arc of Fileni, halfway between El Agheila and en-Nofilia ⁽⁸⁾; the *Giovani Fascisti* (Gen. Sozzani) at en-Nofilia, to give some consistency to a position to be considered intermediate; the *Spezia* Inf. Div. (Gen. Pizzolato), in the area of es-Sultan; the garrison of Marada had gathered at en-Nofilia. At the position of Marsa el-Brega the remaining German units, all motorized, and the Cantaluppi group ⁽⁹⁾ (sketch n. 19).

As Col. Westphal had to explain to Biton, Rommel proposed to extend for a few days the rest of the Italian divisions at en-Nofilia, for the possibility of not being able to resist alone the British forces moving to an impetuous attack. En-Nofilia, in other words, was to represent an intermediate position to exploit of the XXI Corp in favor of the mechanized rearguard in case of a massive effort to break through by the enemy, and to be used with the rear guard, to protect the XXI Corp, during the recovery by the latter's retreat to Buerat.

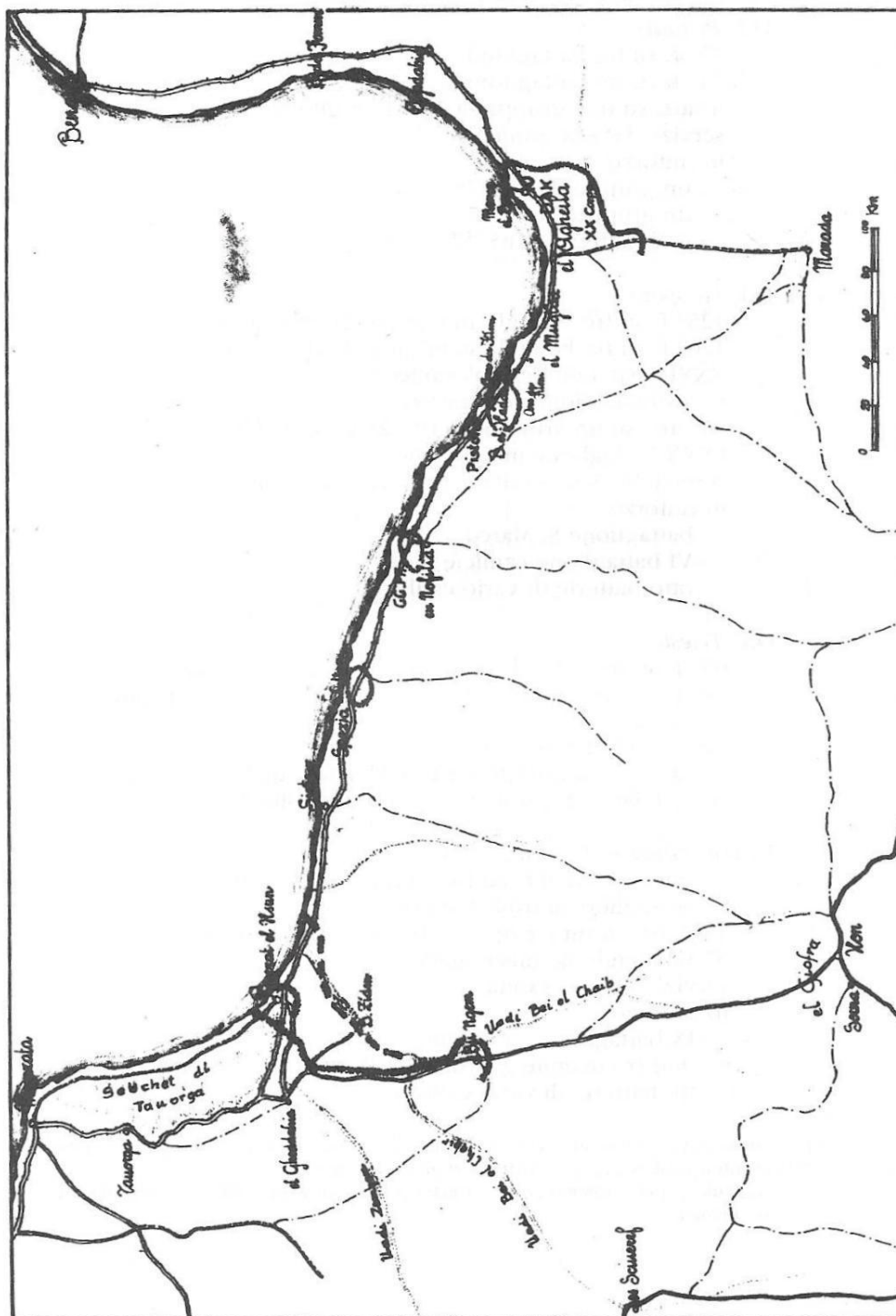
Rommel was not wrong to fear a turning of his right side, against which little or nothing would be able to do, and therefore to include in the scheme of maneuver a precautionary point of support to the rear ⁽¹⁰⁾. Moreover Bastico, while realizing the reasons for the original this variant compared to the agreements, assessed the risk which was the XXI Corp: an inroad to some extent by mechanized units of the British would find exposed immobilized Italian divisions. So he would insist with Rommel to accelerate as much as possible the transport of infantry to Buerat.

His concerns were obviously lower than those who tormented the commander of the ACIT, who replied back to emphasize the danger of turning and concluding that "*an area more or less unguarded by troops between Agheila and Buerat is not, according to my conviction, sustainable under current conditions. I therefore regret I can not now join the suggestion of V.E.*" ⁽¹¹⁾.

While Bastico turned to the Comando Supremo with a very firm letter. At his meeting of 13 November - he remembered - he was

The placement of the ACIT on the date of 8 December

LA DISLOCAZIONE DELL'ACIT ALLA DATA DELL'8 DICEMBRE



CONSTITUTION OF THE ITALIAN DIVISIONS On the date of 1 December 1942	
<i>Pistoia</i> Inf. Div.:	35 th Inf. with three battalions 36 th Inf. with three battalions 3 rd Art. two groups of 100/17 and two of 75/27 Services: 51 st Health sect. in reinforcement: a group of 105/28 a group of 75/27 two batteries of 65/17
<i>La Spezia</i> Inf. Div.:	125 th Inf. with three battalions and a co. Sappers 126 th Inf. with three battalions and a co. Sappers XXXIX Recon battalion LXXX Anti-tank battalion 80 th Art. with a group of 105/28 and three of 65/17 LXXX mixed engineers battalion Services: 80 th Health sect. and 180 th subsistence sect. in reinforcement: <i>S. Marco</i> Battalion VI Camicie Nere Battalion eight batteries of various calibers
<i>Trieste</i> Inf. Div.:	65 th Inf. with three battalions (*), and a co. mortars 81 66 th Inf. with two battalions Inf., one co, Anti-tank (**) and a co. mortars 81 LII mixed engineers battalion 21 st Art. a group of 100/17 and two of 75/27 (***) services: 90 th Health sect. and 176 th subsistence sect.
<i>Giovani Fascisti</i> Arm. Div.:	GG.FF. regiment with three battalions inf. and a co. A/T 8 th Bersaglieri with three battalions 136 th Art. a group of 100/17 and three of 65/17 XXV mixed engineers battalion Services: 53 rd Health sect. in reinforcement: IX independent battalion two companies border guard three batteries of various calibers
(*) constituted respectively with personnel of divisions <i>Trieste</i> , <i>Bologna</i> and <i>Trento</i> . (**) consists of the IV A/T Battalion. <i>Granatieri di Sardegna</i> . (***) constituted respectively with personnel of the 46th artillery <i>Trento</i> and 205th artillery <i>Bologna</i> .	

he recognized the urgent need to send to the ACIT of new and modern tanks and artillery, aircraft and supplies. Since then, as he had added new requirements (front Tunisian), the long-awaited arrival had resolved even in quantities below the minimum: to the accuracy less than 8,000 tons of food, fuel, ammunition and miscellaneous material - against a average requirement of 30,000 tons! And irrespective of the technical inadequacy of the tanks and of the anti-tank guns. "*This situation, which does not hesitate to be called anxious* - he added - *is becoming more common knowledge & is spreading, despite every effort, the not unfounded impression that Libya is left to itself*"⁽¹²⁾.

While continued uninterrupted, though slow, clearing to the west of the infantry and logistics apparatus, were warned of increasing symptoms of a British attack.

Reaching Ajdabiya, Montgomery had imposed a stop. What that could mean the defilade of el-Agheila he knew well: twice it had allowed Rommel to recover and restart the reconquest of Cyrenaica, and he saw no reason to give a third occasion. It was necessary to expel the ACIT and as quickly as possible, so as not to allow the strengthening of the defense.

The problem of the commander of the 8th Army was concerning the supply effort in every respect. In terms of logistics, it is natural that the advance from El Alamein had complicated supplies, but everything was relative. The port of Tobruk was activated on 20 November and the 26 to Benghazi, although the first two ships entered the port as early as four days after their conquest; Alexandria -Tobruk railway was brought back into operation on November 20 until fort Capuzzo and on 1 December up to Tobruk; the excellent organization of the transport service made possible a substantial flow of supplies in a ordinary way, so that on November 21 was opened the *Field Maintenance Centre* of Msus; depots ammunition abandoned during the retreat of the winter of that year were found in good condition; fuel for the *Desert Air Force* was transported by American *Dakotas* to the airports to Benghazi and Ajdabiya.

Therefore, while in mid-November the Command-in-Chief of the Middle East is not calculated attack on the position of el-Agheila before Christmas, on November 29 Montgomery was able to orientate to start operation in the night of 17 December. Precisely with the view of the continuation of the offensive, the 8th Army was undergoing structural changes. The task of unseating the ACIT was entrusted to Gen. Leese, whose 30th Corp was to include the 7th Arm. Div., 51st *Highlanders* Inf. Div. and the 2nd New Zealand Inf. Div.. The 10th Corp, now commanded by Gen. Horrocks, clustered in the area of Benghazi with the 1st Arm. Div., the 50th British Inf. Div. and 4th Indian Inf. Div.: he had to keep in measure to nip any unexpected counter-offensive of Rommel. There remained the

13th corps command and units of the dissolved 44th Inf. Div.. For the 9th Australia Inf. Div had been decided its repatriation.

The initial thought. Montgomery, who did not intend to "*risk a great battle that would involve serious losses*", was to hint at a move from the south enveloping the hope that this threat alone could induced Rommel to abandon positions. Then he admitted the improbability of being able to achieve maximum results with minimum effort and so was oriented towards strong action, based on a broad movement outside of the New Zealand Division. Reached the area of Marada, it would point to the north-west to cut the via Balbia very west of el-Agheila. At the same time, a pressure on the front and air strikes would distract the opponent, to the benefit of a complete turning. In essence, it was the now typical offensive of those who leaned to one side the sea.

During the preparation phase, the 8th Army Command carefully studied the terrain, the news on the defensive structures and the Italian-German dispositions. He knew immediately that the Italian infantry were moved away to the west, but most had fully able to draw on the information source of *Enigma*. He learned, so that the desperate pleas of Rommel were not met, in part because the OKW was giving priority to the Tunisian theater, partly because of the impressive series of sinkings caused by the Allies, and partly due to the repeated incursions of the British and American air forces on the infrastructure of Tripoli.

On the 5th deciphered the forces situation and availability of the ACIT on 1 December 54 Panzer, 42 Italian medium tanks, no petrol and little ammunition. The units of *Fliegerführer Afrika* had just a day of fuel and had to even limit the aerial survey. December 6 knew that the supply would be used for the ACIT the Tunisian ports. December 8, new decryption consoling: the *Luftwaffe* was "immobilized" in Libya and the ACIT had at its disposal fuel just to move back but not for a battle movement. The evening of the same day, another gift of *Enigma*: Rommel informed the OKW and the Comando Supremo that would hold until the last possible moment against the expected British attack at any moment, however, in the case of strong pressure, it would taken away from the stranglehold⁽¹³⁾.

With such a flood of information, remained in command of the 8th Army a single question: what to do when emerged "*clear signs of retreat*" of the enemy? In fact, as of December 9 they surfaced conflicting signs on the front of the ACIT. Rommel did not remain but to await the offensive was a denial of the now well-known hypothesis about the German field marshal, however, doubts remained.

The plan devised by Leese predicted that New Zealanders to depart on 11 December, so as to provide a base on the track north of Marada in the night of the 16th (one day before the operation),

with the task of eliminating any Axis structure until Maaten Giofer, to occupy or control Marada, to push patrols towards the Arch of Fileni (or *Marble Arch*). The 51st *Highlanders* had to win Marsa el-Brega with two brigades and open a gate for the 7th Arm. Div. to Bir es-Suera with the third.

At 03:00 on 12 December began a series of local actions by the 51st Inf. Div. well supported by artillery. Subjected to an intense fire lasted about three hours, the forward positions held by the *Luftwaffenjagerbrigade* (Col. Nikolai) straddling the rolling coastal at the height of Marsa el-Brega, they ceded the front to the 152nd Scottish Inf. Bd and the defenders retreated to the positions held by the 90th Light. Later, during the morning, he spoke of an effort of the 153rd Inf. Bd. against the stronghold of Bir es-Suera. At the initial success of the *Scots* was followed a decisive counterattack by the 15th *Panzer* who restored the situation (sketch n. 20).

There could be no doubt about the character of 'taste' of these moves, not that the very high probability of something far more significant for the next day. In addition, by tapping it was clear that the British now knew the inconsistency of the defenses remained on the Marsa el-Brega - Marada line. "*It must surely count on - reads the bulletin of the ACIT on the 12th - that the enemy will continue his attacks with actual reinforced perhaps already entering in the night, but definitely on the 13 December.*"

Given so, the order of the Comando Supremo to avoid a decisive battle in place, the impossibility of using a reaction operated for lack of fuel, the probability of a bypass from the south, Rommel decided to break away and to bring the mobile units to el-Mugtaa (about twenty kilometers west of el-Agheila), starting the retrograde movement that night, without leaving even from en-Nofilia and from the Arch of Fileni for Buerat the *Pistoia* and *Giovani Fascisti* divisions⁽¹⁴⁾. On balance believed, as explained Mancinelli, can earn fifteen days, starting from the abandonment of Marsa el-Brega, multiplying the time of arrest to be imposed on Montgomery, and provided for the arrival of the XXI Corp to Buerat at least one week in advance of the rearguard.

On the evening of the 12th to the 8th Army Command spread the conviction that the Italian-German mobile troops were preparing to dislodge. This prompted Montgomery to anticipate the offensive of forty-eight hours (night on 15 rather than on the 17) and Leese urged its divisions to take the pressure.

On the morning of the 13th the 51st *Highlanders* (Gen. Wimberley) was set in motion at the turn of the Via Balbi with the 152nd and 153rd brigade and the Greek brigade, temporarily received in reinforcement. South of sebcha es-Seghira proceeded the 152nd Scottish Inf. Bd, leading the 7th Arm. Div. The progress was slow, not because of the "*huge quantities of mines*" to which Montgomery referred, but for the existence of only two natural passes that the sides of the impassable *sebcha*

Schizzo n. 20

[illegible]

allowed, with little expense and a skillful use of the mined obstacle, to impose a sharp slowdown of the attacker.

At the dawn of the 14th the rear guard of the Italian-German armored forces, formed by the 90th Light and the Cantaluppi group, was placed in a semi-circle from the east of el-Agheila to the *sebcha* Carcura (sketch n. 21). The British advance continued very distant at Marsa el-Brega, but in Bir es-Suera 7th Arm. Div. (Gen. Harding), bypassed the 153rd Inf. Bd. in the thick fog of dawn, he came to unblock more than the positions abandoned, opening like a fan with the intention to circumvent the south ed- Agheila with the 8th Arm. Bd. and the 131st Mot. Bd. The main effort was entrusted to 8th Arm. Bd. (Gen. Custance), who sought a passage between the *sebcha* Carcura and track for Marada, right in correspondence of the Cantaluppi group.

The Italian disposition was very simple. The 66th Infantry (I and II battalion, each of the two companies) held a front of about four kilometers on three cornerstones of the company two advanced and one backward. On the rear there was the III/3 *Pistoia* with ten pieces of artillery. In a reserve company of XIV/31st Tank with twelve tanks. The XVII/31st Tank remained available to Cantaluppi. No tactical connection on the left, with the 90th Light. The first contact was made by the 8th Arm. Bd. around 09:00, but only after noon loomed the British attack. Actually, the start was not overwhelming, in part because the enemy, covered by the folds of the land, tended likely to achieve success creeping between the I/66th Inf. and the *sebcha*; in part for the repeated interventions of the M. 13 tank platoons; and partly due to the fire reaction of the cornerstones and of the artillery barrage.

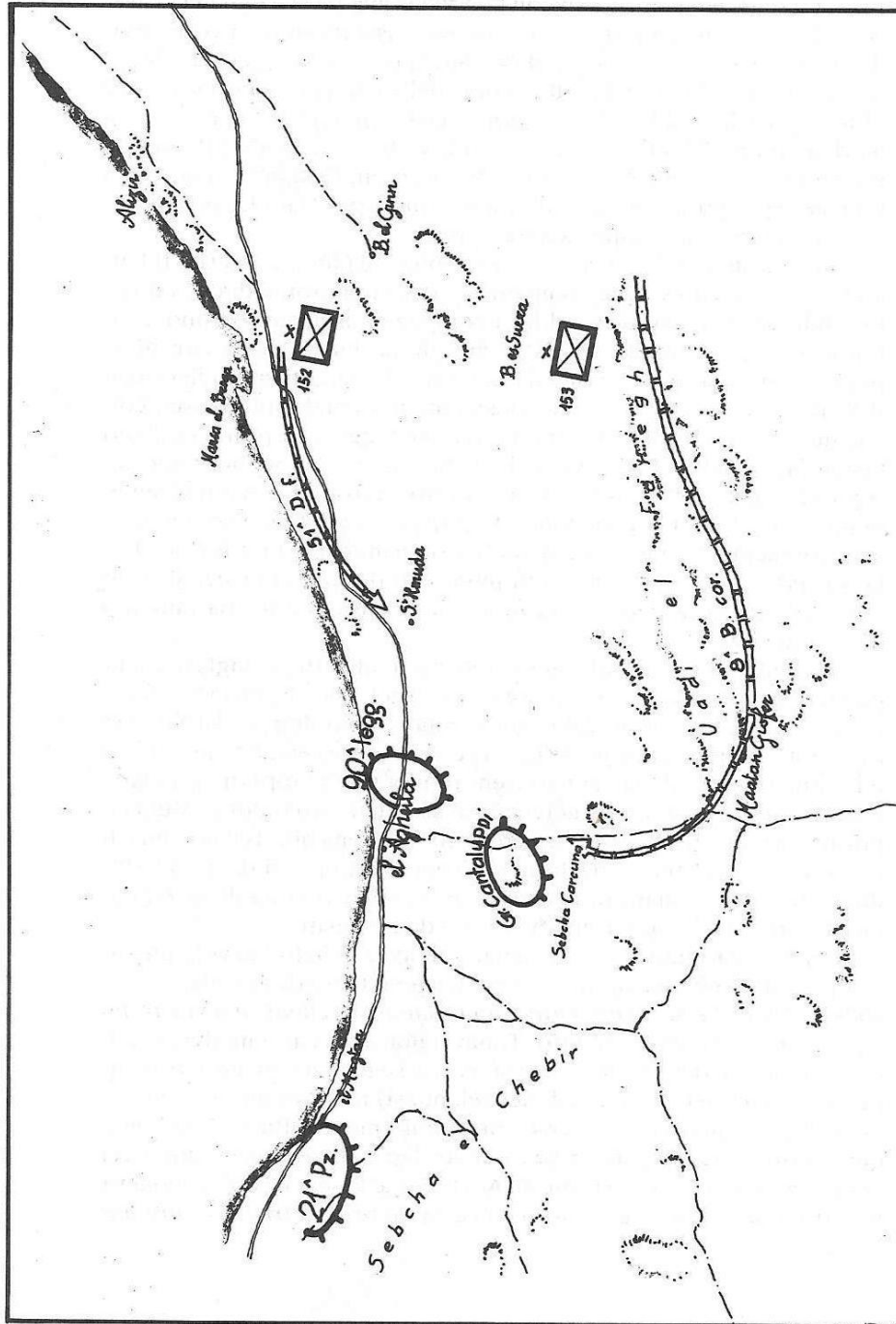
Having noted the inanity of this attempt, at 16:00 the British makes every effort. The fierce resistance of the I/66th Inf., Hit the front, and the success of the counter-attack launched by XIV/31st Tank broke off the action of the 7th Arm. Div. it was now 17:30 and the first shadows of evening They allowed to Cantaluppi to break away and move with the 90th Light thrown back on the narrows of el-Mugtaa, manned by the 21st *Panzer*. The losses were sensitive: 109 men (including eight officers) killed, wounded and missing; eight pieces of 47/32, twelve vehicles and fourteen tanks destroyed. Resulted in twenty British armored means destroyed or damaged.

Rommel was grateful to have avoided the Italian unit turning and the likely elimination of the 90th Light, enough to recall the incident: "*The Italians behaved excellent and deserved the deepest recognition*"⁽¹⁵⁾. However he had no other reasons for satisfaction. Aerial reconnaissance had reported a large mass of troops (it was New Zealand) moving south-southwest of Maaten Giofer to, presumably, Bir el-Merduma. That day had been sunk the tanker *Macedonia* and two fast ships with 3,500 tons. intended to the ACIT. And that night the DAK had at its disposal in all respects of one day's fuel. "*I resented beyond measure*

The battle of el Agheila (14 December)

Schizzo n. 21

IL COMBATTIMENTO DI EL-AGHEILA
(14 dicembre)



being forced to watch passively the wonderful opportunities that the enemy was offering for effective counter-attack "said Rommel, thinking how it would have been easy, if only he had enough gas, seal the pass of el-Mugtaa with a part of the troops and annihilate the column with the New Zealand mass of armored units. Instead, as things stood, the danger of a catastrophe continued to loom over the ACIT.

For the New Zealand Division it was going well, despite hitches logistical and certain misunderstandings with the *Desert Air Force*. The 14th it became necessary to make a long stop due to disruption in fuel supplies, but at the end of the day Gen. Freyberg communicated to Gen. Horrocks who hoped to get to Bir el-Merduma late the next morning. In fact the events unfolded differently.

The division moved in two columns (sketch n. 22). Right the 4th Light Arm. Bd. (Gen. Harvey), on the left the 6th Inf. Bd. followed by the 5th. The appointment for both columns was set in the area of Bir el-Merduma, where it was assumed to meet the enemy, and of course, the 4th Light Arm. Bd. was the spearhead unit. Except that, when the two regiments of armored cars, the 1st *King's Dragoon Guards* and the 1st *Royal Dragoons*, came to Bir Scemmer with the German 33rd Recon. Bn and Guerat El Gibs with the 15th *Panzer*, the *Royal Scots Greys* were long overdue because left without petrol. Since the *Greys* were the only ones with tanks - a total of 17 *Sherman*, 4 *Grant* and 15 *Stuart* efficient - it was necessary to mark time.

Meanwhile Rommel, informed since the dawn of the advance of a significant mechanized mass (now thought to be the 10th Arm. Div.) in the direction of Bir el-Merduma, and soon also an attempt by the 7th Arm. Div. to force the pass of el-Mugtaa defense by the 21st *Panzer*, he had alarmed⁽¹⁶⁾. Not harboring hope to stand in comparison against two British armored divisions, especially since, as reported to Bastico at 09:20: "*Conduct of offensive combat and avoid further [= avoid combat] for the moment not possible because of the fuel situation.*" So he ordered the DAK to rush back up to Bir el-Merduma.

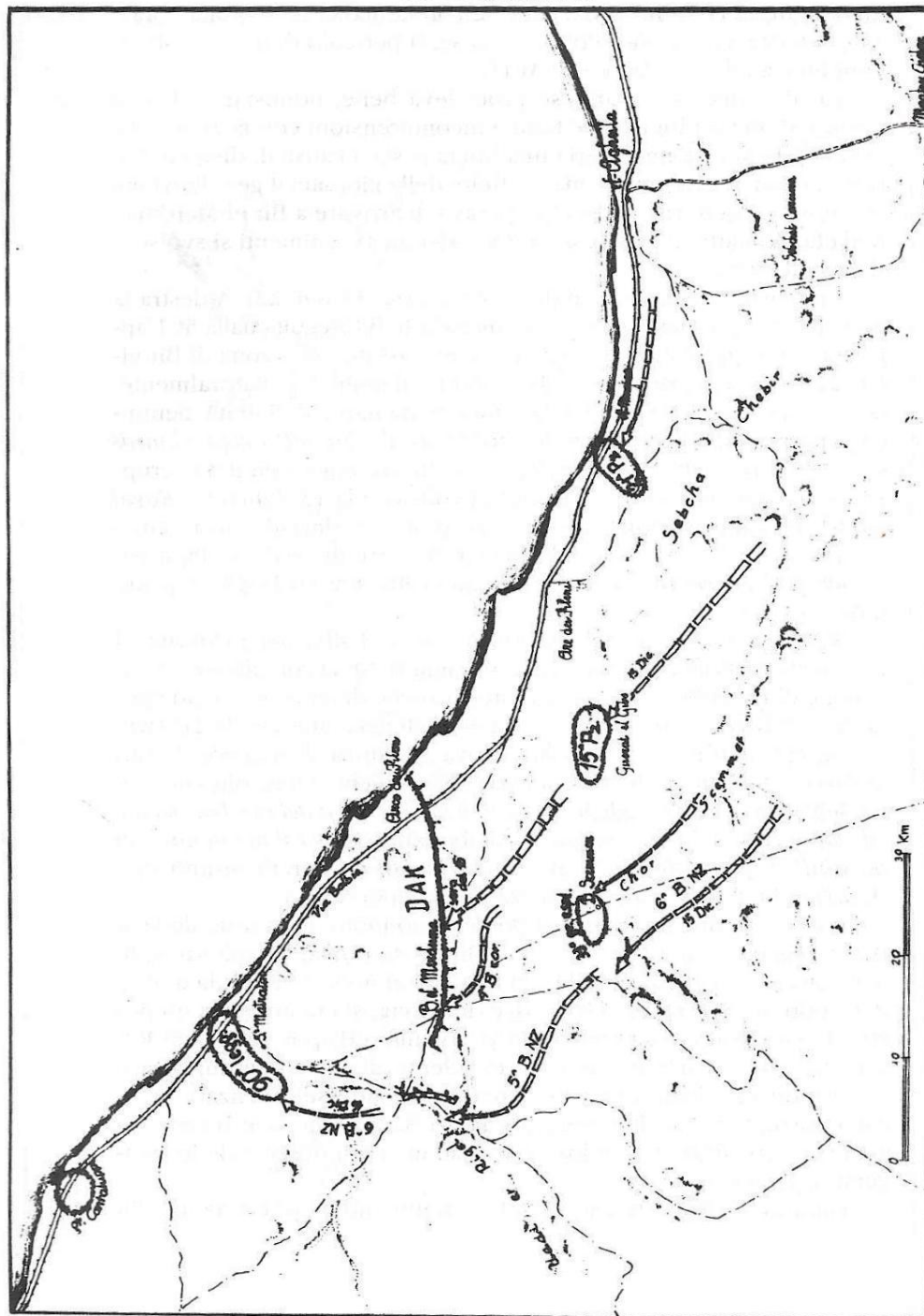
The result was that only in the afternoon the head of the 4th Light Arm. Bd. reached the area of Bir el-Merduma, hastily occupied earlier by the Germans. As for New Zealand, the 6th Inf. Bd, swerving in error by the director of the march, it had stopped a little to the west of the *uadi* er-Rigel. Freyberg then ordered that the 5th Inf. Bd. closed in below and they deployed to the west of Bir el-Merduma, supported on the above named *wadis*; the 6th Inf. Bd. resume its advanced and absolutely trying to intercept the Via Balbi, the 4th Light Arm. Bd. gather, standing ready to intervene according to the progress of events.

During the whole night the 6th Inf. Bd., moving at about the

The detachment of the DAK at el Agheila (15-18 December)

Schizzo n. 22

LO SGANCIAMENTO DEL DAK DA EL-AGHEILA
(15-16 dicembre)



blindly, it went into an area that seemed to ensure tactical domain on the coast, at least judging from the noise of traffic heading west. But at dawn of the 16th brought a disappointment: the maneuver failed.

In fact, if on one hand a variety of difficulties made it difficult for Horrocks hook the German rearguard, this was living under the constant of the worry of dramatic shortage of gasoline and ammunition. As a result, experienced a new contact astride the coast road (7th Arm. Div.) And El Merduma (4th Light Arm. Bd.), as well as accentuated the tuning (6th Inf. Bd), Rommel decided to move back the DAK to tien-Nofilia, taking advantage of the night and under the protection of the 90th Light and the Recon groups deployed at the *wadis* Matratin. The rest of the ACIT, except part of the *Giovani Fascisti* remained at en-Nofilia, withdrawing on Sirte.

At 23:05 Rommel signaled to the Comando Superiore that "*the situation of fuel and ammunition continues to be extremely tense. The lack of fuel does not, for the moment, a further retreat of the army from the area around Nofilia westward.*" The circumstances were really poor, so that the 21st *Panzer*; come to en-Nofilia, it stopped without a drop of gasoline, and the 15th had to even remain in Bir el-Merduma the whole night waiting for a supply that would enable it to disengage.

On the morning of the 16th Freyberg realized that his 6th Brigade was isolated, at about ten kilometers north-east of the 5th and three or four kilometers from the Via Balbi, the inability to stop the hasty retreat of the 15th *Panzer*, the 90th Light and the recon groups.

"The enemy - Freyberg communicated to command the 30th Corp - through the intervals in small columns including tanks, high-speed, with significant dispersion. Very difficult to intercept them (...)" ⁽¹⁷⁾.

Now the retreat of the ACIT proceeded expeditiously. On the evening of the 17th the *Giovani Fascisti*, the Cantaluppi group and almost all the German units reached Sirte, leaving the 90th Light, stopped at es -Sultan, the task of rearguard. Only the 15th *Panzer* encountered problems: stuck at en-Nofilia a new lack of fuel could start moving again on the morning of the 18th, opening a path in the file of the Zealanders.

While it was in full swing maneuver retreating from the positions of Marsa el Brega - el-Agheila - Marada and while every effort was being arranging the line of Buerat, returning to surface orientation of Rommel to transfer the ACIT to Tunisia , to reunite with the other Axis forces in place and move to conquer French North Africa.

Bastico, once made aware by Mancinelli that the thesis was conquering many German officers had addressed to Cavallero:

(...) I do not think that even now the Commander of the ACIT has clear intentions to retire rapidly to Tunisia; and the exodus of German means through the Libyan-Tunisian border has so far been limited - according to investigations made by me at the border - about 200 vehicles, with about 800 men, a few pieces of artillery and a few armored cars.

But it is clear that the hypothesis is viewed with increasing attention from German commands. And it is also clear that, at any moment, the hypothesis can become the project and the project reality, especially if sustained over the lack of promised reinforcements - essential to stop the enemy on the positions of Buerat - and the current tragic supply crises (...)."

It is indeed clear that the same reasons that they did not see any possibility to Marshal Rommella resistance on prepared positions Marsa Brega-Agheila, even more so, for not prepared positions Buerat-Gheddahia.

In fact, the Marshal Rommel (and the less I) never said he thought the withdrawal of Buerat put the defense in better condition, but instead has always explicitly stated that it had the sole purpose of gaining time to allow the turnout of means and troops needed to stop the enemy.

So unfortunately being, past experience shows us that any day the decision to withdraw into Tunisia can become present to our ally, which has good reason to do this, which is not bound by emotional ties to Tripolitania, and that means practically sufficient to carry all his troops.

This event, to relate with realistic eye, would leave them once again to the mercy of the enemy is not only and not so much our divisions, after efforts to concentrate vehicles, could perhaps be largely withdrawn, as the troops of Tripoli and the Sahara and not rich but still large warehouses and factories of the Inland and Tripoli.

And this, of course, regardless from the organizations and civilian resources, which in any case would remain on site.

If then also the Comando Supremo had in mind of reaching, if necessary, to a retreat into Tunisia, it is essential that I knew with all the urgency that the case requires. Without wanting it to forecast nor power, it is also legitimate to infer from the experience of Marsa el-Brega that the enemy can be mounted in a few days an offensive unit that can be a real danger to our deployment and that therefore induce Marshal Rommel to escape the danger maneuvering in retreat: either - allowed me to say so - will be worth to arrest him, as are earned in the past, against your and my orders.

In other words, and to sum up:

- Our current forces are not sufficient to give trust to a long stand against the British 8th Army;
- Then the Germans can, at any moment, and also very soon, suddenly translate into action their current orientation toward a general retreat into Tunisia;
- This decision, more or less sudden, it matters to us the sure loss of part of the divisions and of nearly all the troops of Tripolitania and the Sahara, as well as warehouses.

It is therefore necessary that I should, right away, clear guidelines in regard to you, Mr. Marshall, for powers, as appropriate:

- Or begin straight away, with the necessary caution, clearing and logistics department on some areas Tunisian I will be indicated;
- Or was just about to sacrifice everything to defend to the last, with the greatest honor possible, Tripolitania.

Frankly I soldier said to another soldier starkly the truth. You know what I am fond of Tripolitania; understand how much I let her grieve. But the situation must be looked in the face as it is; and the dilemma described above does not allow intermediate solutions"⁽¹⁸⁾.

Hoping to receive explicit directives, Bastico prepared to discuss the matter with Rommel. On the 17th went to fort Buerat for an meeting with the commander of the ACIT. After a summary of the events of recent days, he went into the subject. The supply of gasoline was so low as to be seen as problematic mere transfer to Buerat the troops in contact with the enemy. Not to mention the possibility of reaction: the DAK had 60 tanks, at Buerat there were 12, another 10 were in Tripoli without petrol, so it was about eighty vehicles, many of which have excellent cannons. But how to use them without fuel and with just a third of a *unfoc*?

That being the case, one wonders if there was really agreed to face a fight to the bitter end on the Buerat line. *"If we lose this battle - Rommel continued - the enemy will go undisturbed until Tunis. And no one could block his way."* Was not preferable, then, fall back fighting till the Tunisian border and in Gabes, to take advantage of the positions held at the time by the French? Such a solution would involve an expenditure certainly lower than that required by a defensive battle, and Tunisia in the mountainous terrain could offer a much better position against the preponderance of the 8th Army.

Bastico agreed on the limited reliance presented by Buerat line against a violent collision, but considered many other factors more or less deliberately minimized by Rommel. The operational situation in Tunisia, where the Axis did not have but a scant 30,000 men and with little artillery, appeared anything but happy and the ports of Tunis, Bizerte, Sfax and Sousse were under the Anglo-American aviation raids; the Mareth line had no weapons, and works with many unusable because blown up; the apparatus of the Intendenza could not be abandoned in the block and, on the other hand, the only problem of transferring to Tunisia something like 200,000 men (including Libya) made him tremble.

On balance, a resolution which advocated by Rommel for the high value strategic policy that characterized it could only be taken by the Comando Supremo, the rest already interested. For his part, he pointed to Bastico, admitted the convenience of studying the use of the line ,Homs -Garian for subsequent further fall backs.

Rommel insisted on one point: the understanding that order until the contrary he would comply with the instructions received, the decision to hold out to the bitter end or not the positions of Buerat had to be quick, essential in order to promptly withdraw troops not motorized, ie Italian divisions ⁽¹⁹⁾. Apart from the fact that there were on the order has been changed to stiffen Buerat, in fact he was not going to rush things more than necessary. Sirte could be held until the emergence of a predominant pressure or the real threat of a turning,

the usual assumption unacceptable for the salvation of the ACIT⁽²⁰⁾. His apprehensions, rather, stemmed from the conviction that the Comando Supremo would always given consent to a retreat at the last moment, thereby creating the danger of a decoupling a material impossibility.

Aside from it, the existing fuel, including supplies provided for the 19th, just allowed to gather in the area of Buerat. Mancinelli also regretted the continuing crisis: "*This passive attitude forcibly - communicated to the Comando Superiore - having also lose a lot of opportunities that the enemy offered to inflict severe counter-offensive blows*"⁽²¹⁾.

Bastico reported immediately in Rome, indicating the exact reasons presented by Rommel, exposing his objections and ensuring that he has confirmed the order of resistance to the bitter end at Buerat until further notice, the Comando Supremo. Ultimately, weighed pros and cons, he considered the defense line of Buerat as the best solution, "*at long as the Motherland immediately an exceptional effort to reach the east purpose in essential supplies and means*"⁽²²⁾. Objectively, such a condition was unrealistic and Bastico well had to know. The fact that he advanced, though conscious to remove it with any practical value to the idea of a final battle at Buerat, perhaps stemmed from his intent to induce the Comando Supremo to overreach in clear terms. As we know, he was not enthusiastic about the tactical significance of the line Buerat, but he felt bound by the peremptory directives of Rome, knew that the little material strengthening had been employed on this line and he was convinced that, once he reaches the line Homs, Rommel would have advanced excellent reasons to support the need for further immediate retreat.

On December 18, came to the Comando Superiore's the response of Cavallero a long letter of the 15th. In essence, the note difficult situation in the Mediterranean was delaying the expansion of forces in Tunisia and preventing the expected tightening of supplies in Tripolitania. Since the amount of fuel supply depended on the time available, the Duce had defined the goal to be achieved: maximum gain of time. Consequently, "*on the of line Buerat the troops of the ACIT the task to stall with resistance to the bitter end. Make known to Marshal Rommel this is the categorical order of the Duce*"⁽²³⁾.

Bastico transmitted to the person communication, but not bring himself to endorse a basic misunderstanding and said the Comando Supremo urgently needed in confirming the need for action is absolutely out of the ordinary to bring Tripolitania materials and resources required. "*Otherwise -he warned without further ado- exclude the possibility that Rommel can follow order received*"⁽²⁴⁾.

Indeed Rommel exploded. In part he was disappointed by a decision he considered suicide; in part, irritated by the declared impossibility of the Comando Superiore to withdraw simultaneously from Buerat the Italian infantry

(about 30,000 men); in part, to hit a new warning of Bastico: "*It is on the other hand absolutely necessary that the troops on foot are not again sacrificed*"⁽²⁵⁾. Surely it influenced also the feeling, widespread in the ACIT, the opponent was preparing a new attempt to turn and, this time, in more style to avoid another failure. The fact is that his stance was fierce and controversy.

The first reaction, immediate, was addressed to the person of Bastico. There is likely to be a British push on the direction of Tarhuna (or Garian) - Tripoli, with the turning of the deployment of Buerat, "*want to please give instructions for speedy conduct of combat in case specified*"⁽²⁶⁾.

The second took place the next morning and, while pointing again to Bastico, was also transmitted to von Rintelen for information of the Comando Supremo and the OKW:

"Yesterday, the Comando Superiore of the Armed Forces of Libya (Superlibia) gave the order to maintain the position of Buerat to the bitter end. For this purpose have already been used immobile soldiers [= left with out transport] Italian and German. Or now it requires that in no case 30,000 men of Italian troops on foot are once again sacrificed. This request is in contradiction to the order of yesterday.

Or defend the position Buerat, this [= and why] you need every man, every weapon, being implicit in it the danger of annihilation of the Italian-German troops. Or rescue non-motorized troops for immediate withdrawal. Only then can to halt enemy formations motorized position of Buerat.

Please give immediate decision. The Army continues to defend until further order"⁽²⁷⁾.

The message was shown to Cavallero at 16:30 the same day of the 20th by Col. von Waldenburg, during the return trip from Rastenburg, the special train. At 18:15 Cavallero phoned the Gen. Magli. It was greatly annoyed because Hitler had to ask what the Comando Supremo had in mind to do in front of the dilemma posed by Rommel: "*entwe der ... oder ...*"*. He began by blaming Bastico. "I find the untimely telegram of Bastico - He said to Magli -who this thing must have always present, but when they ordered him to resist the argument I give the order not to remain in Buerat and I wonder if this was not done on purpose (...). Bastico has chosen the wrong time and the form to tell him he must not have sharp losses. The order had been given to resist to the bitter end, to prevent him to retreat to soon [= the order to resist to the bitter end had been given to prevent Rommel immediately retreating]."

Then he touched the heart of the matter: you had to hold until such time as to continue would have meant annihilation. Bastico had to do speak to Rommel like this: "On the whole you have given the impression of a bias to withdraw at any cost. Now you must instead hold for days and even hours. It is

German = either ... or

operational conduct very delicate in front of which is simpler and more convenient to leave no doubt." It should take into daily contact with Rommel, considering him "day by day" the situation but at the same time providing the means of transport, presumably now being the numerous distances decreased. More than that he could not say. "You can not, having in place two commanders as Bastico and Rommel - he reminded Cavallero -take a decision on the basis of a telegram. Facing have nothing but the spearhead of the enemy!"

Finally he criticized the behavior of Rommel: "Rommel when he wanted to retire has always done so. Must Bastico screen the reports and face the discomfort of such daily contact (...). Rommel exaggerates things: every day has a fierce fight that is not true. Bastico checks; make doing his own reconnaissance. Act so as not to sacrifice the bulk (...). Especially being alongside Rommel and screen reports"⁽²⁸⁾.

You can not possibly deny the feeling of extreme discomfort from similar phone call, purposely reported almost entirely. Even a comment appears superfluous, so obvious are the considerations that result. Cavallero probably first realized that the game was coming in Africa for the worst and understanding Italian impotence, which instinctively tried to withhold mentally, urged him to dispatch orders inappropriately clearly, but with whom, perhaps, he believed he could still exercise some influence on events.

It also presumed to advisers close to him, the Chief of Staff General and the man, put together mistrust if not suspicion. According to Ciano, very explicit, already a month at least the wind had shifted. The king had raised doubts about Cavallero: "*if we thought a new leader, would agree to consider the old men, they are the best*" (19 November). He had also mentioned to Mussolini, who had initially shown little inclination to "*proceed to changes in command, while engaged on two fronts*" (November 22), but now it looked quite different view: "*Cavallero has now passed. A few years ago had a lively brain. Not any more*" (December 22).

They, on the German side, things were better. The operations on the Russian front aroused many concerns openly and tended to throw the responsibility on the Italian troops of the breakthrough (18 December). Finally, to now the arrow of delivery, to some extent malignant Hitler's demand to know the decisions of the Comando Supremo about the final question posed by Rommel⁽²⁹⁾.

In these circumstances, on the 20th departed from Rome two dispatches for Bastico. The first, signed by Mussolini, was sharp:

"I saw the telegram Rommel directed to you and the dilemma that he will arise. I confirm my order and you will confirm them and Rommel. It is imperative to resist at Buerat with the greatest decision and as long as possible (...)" ⁽³⁰⁾.

The second, signed by Cavallero, reflects the intricacies of these addresses:

"The task entrusted to you by the Duce to buy time as much as possible should not be subject to the sending of reinforcements and supplies, given uncertain situation in the Mediterranean and you note. Under agreed task it falls your expertise implementing operational measures & logistics needed in connection at the situation, bearing in mind that strenuous resistance of Buerat positions will earn that time that is need to improve the Tunisian situation & resume with greater security & intensity starts in Libya"⁽³¹⁾.

He was so moved by the *resistance to the bitter end to keep as long as possible*. That was something, although Bastico, remained faithful to the directives from above, while Rommel replied:

"Reference your 3548 of today. Comando Supremo & my order to resist at the bitter end on the positions of Buerat it is explicit & must be executed until the last even if it involves, as rightly observed, the possibility of partial annihilation our troops (...)"⁽³²⁾.

Rommel immediately replies:

"With what is decided that the position of Buerat must be held against an enemy attack until the last man and therefore is excluded the withdraw and transport of non-mobile troops.

The second question to you by mail with radio n. 3546, however, still remains open; the enemy can not seriously attack the Buerat line, undertake with his main forces to the area of Bu Ngem or even further south, a push over the Tarhuna-Garian line of Tripoli. In this case, given the scarcity of fuel and the current fighting strength of the mobile units, should the Army fight the battle?

In view of the urgency, I ask for the quickest decision"⁽³³⁾.

The urgency Rommel was talking about stemmed from the fear of the immediate recovery of the British pressure. Instead Montgomery considered concluded the battle of el-Agheila. Summing up, the ACIT had taken losses and its morale was weakened, the 8th Army now possessed a position that allowed to resist a possible counter-offensive, the outlook is favorable expressed. Now he imposed a stop for a tactical and logistical reorganization, leaving the 4th Light Arm. Bd. the task of maintaining contact with the Italian-German rearguard.

On the one hand, it was necessary to amass substantial amounts in new deposits and advanced, then that flowed daily from Tobruk 800 tons of material, it made it essential to improve the discharge capacity of the port of Benghazi. On the other, he had to create a new base (including Sirte) for the *Desert Air Force*, so that it was able to supply a full contribution to the Battle of Buerat.

Based on these considerations, Montgomery determined to stop the 30th Corp, with the 51st *Highlanders* at el-Agheila, 7th Arm. Div. at the Arc of Fileni and the 2nd New Zealand at en-Nofilia. The 4th Arm. Bd. had

seized Sirte and from that area westward push mechanized patrols. By calculating the use of four divisions in a battle of ten days to reach Tripoli, the stockpiling of essential supplies in order it involved a period of about three weeks. Toward January 7 the 30th Corp could resume the advance beyond en-Nofilia and start the battle on the 15th if the enemy had shown signs of retreat on the 19th if he had remained in place. As for the 10th Corp, on the twentieth he was moving in the area of el-Agheila. This was the orientation of the commander of the 8th Army.

In the welter of messages followed one another and crisscrossed, Bastico tried not to falter, passing power to Rommel as coming from the Comando Supremo. Realizing that something was changing, he transmitted the order, signed by Mussolini, to "*resist Buerat with maximum & decision as long as possible in order to give time to Tunis via Tripoli to convey all that can feed & prolong our resistance*"⁽³⁴⁾. Is also adapted to dampen the controversy with Rommel, warning him that it had ordered the basting of a defense positions Tarhuna-Garian no forces to for security and noting that the possibility of an enveloping movement to so broad he could not escape the aerial exploration and then there would be no way and time to run for cover sufficient to the task⁽³⁵⁾.

A good account, then did something else: he ordered Gen. Roncaglia, commander of Tripoli, to restore, within the limits of feasibility, the French fortifications of the Mareth line, by sending the sector command of the XXVIII Border Guard, with infantry elements from Zuara and a couple of groups of 149/12.

But a clarification is required. In a long telegram to Cavallero she asked to consider the circumstances with realistic sense, that is, on the basis of the existing operating Instrument, and the inherent weakness of the position of Buerat. Given the above,

“(...) Even abstracting the animus of Marshal Rommel – he wrote- which makes no secret of suffering rather than accept the situation persists and the need of a retreat in Tunisia, thus acting in the negative on the combative will & command of the troops, I confirm that the continuation of the resistance on the positions of Buerat for that time presumably not short of where there is mention in your radio 34155 Op., can not be detached from the exceptional effort that at my radio 01/20584 of 7 December.

So I think it was my duty to say, and not for disclaimer, but needed clarification. And since the Duce asks me to acknowledge receipt of your radio 34157 Op., I would be grateful if you would also tell him the contents of this”⁽³⁶⁾.

Cavallero took time. Just returned to Rome, he saw Kesselring, leaving for Tripoli and aware of the orders given to the ACIT, and expressed the feeling that Rommel was looking for a pretext to withdraw. Having his interlocutor shared this impression,

according to him caused by distrust of Rommel in a success, he said that "*we must keep in Buerat for as long as possible. You will receive at the appropriate time, and if it is necessary, the order to retire*"⁽³⁷⁾.

It's hard to accept the idea that Rome could lead effectively a desperate fight as one that was leading the ACIT. But the fact is that both the marshals did not believe the problems referred to by Rommel. According to Kesselring the ACIT had more tanks than the enemy, its logistical situation was improving every day and with a counterattack could earn "*at least a few weeks*." Cavallero informed that the Führer approved the concept of staying in Buerat, while Goering was busy "*keeping up the morale of Rommel*". Of course, once the need has arisen, a retreat would not have encountered any objection, but now in Tunisia space was too cramped. Kesselring showed agree on this point and concluded by stating confidently that "*Rommel still has some good cards, retiring, would lose without the play*". Indeed, he didn't take away the 90th Light for use in Tunisia just because "*this would be selfishness*"⁽³⁸⁾.

The establishment of a relative calm was soon perceived operational of the ACIT, who took the opportunity to complete the supply of units on the positions of Buerat and to improve the fieldwork. On Christmas Eve the Italian-German device could be summarized as follows. Position of strength, the XXI Corp with *Pistoia*, *Luftwaffenjaegerbrigade* and *Spezia* online and *Trieste* (except the artillery deployed) in reserve; XX Corp with *Giovani Fascisti*, 164th Light and the *Centauro* group⁽³⁹⁾ in line and a battle group to the battalion level of the *Trieste* in reserve. On the *Wadi el-Bei* Chebir a advance structure of security with the 90th Light, the 580th Recon. Bn. and the 21st *Panzer*⁽⁴⁰⁾. On the exposed side, a Libyan battlegroup (former Marada garrison) at Bu Ngem. In Sirte, in the rear, the 15th *Panzer* (sketch n. 23).

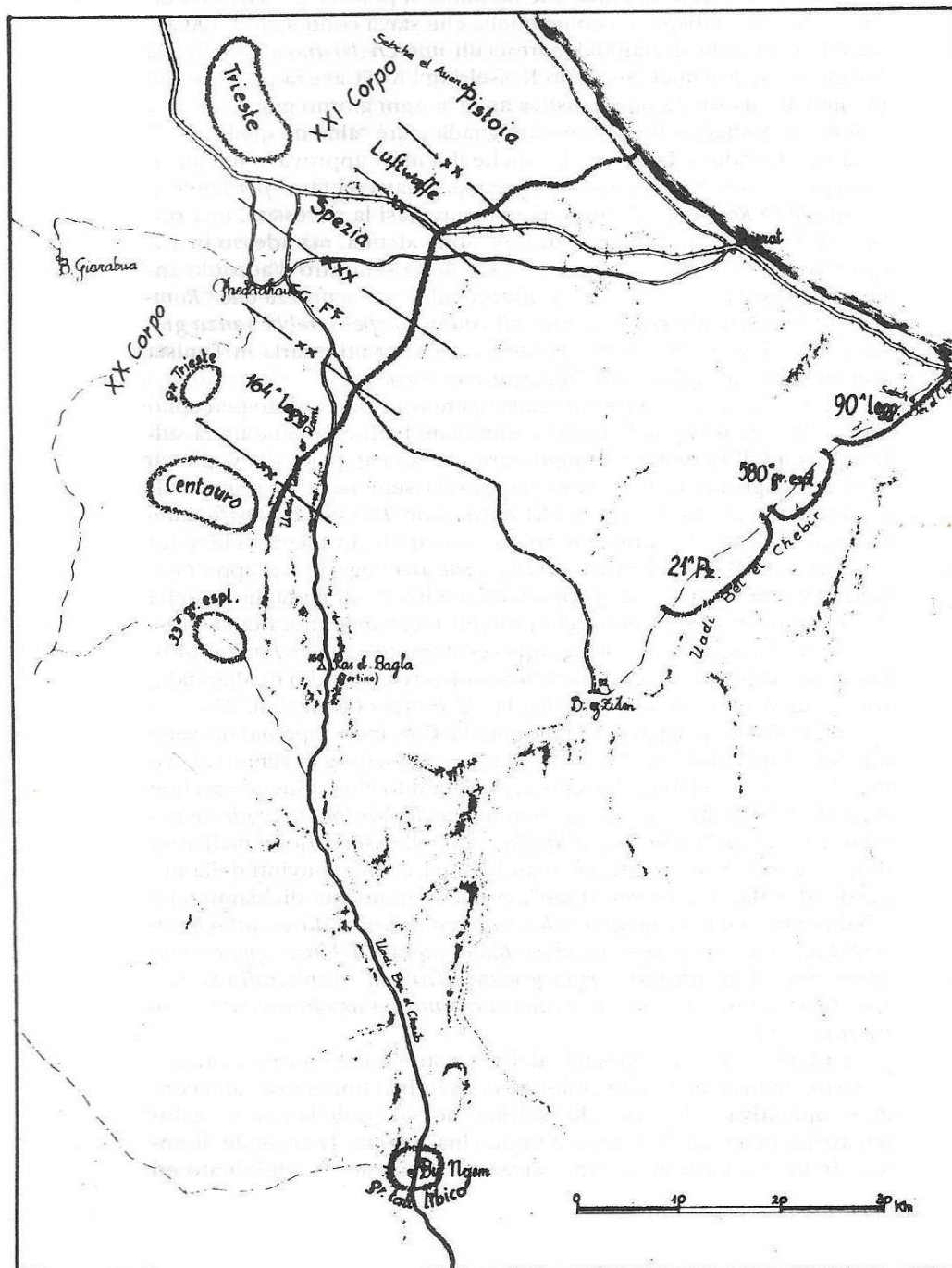
In the late afternoon of December 23, the Comando Supremo received a brief report about the meeting of Bastico-Kesselring which took place at the Comando Superiore Libya. The first had reaffirmed that Buerat would turn a vigorous defense "*provided supplies essential from the Motherland reach the defense*" and, Kesselring mischievous observation that not all commanders seemed convinced of the need for such a "*strong defense*", had openly declared that this depended on "*harmful influence exerted by Marshal Rommel & by his staff, which explicitly declares opportunity abandonment Tripoli & withdraw to Tunisia. Marshal Kesselring has recognized as such attitude is totally inappropriate*"⁽⁴¹⁾.

However ... the crux of the matter was still wrapped in a set of shades unacceptable for a healthy operational performance, and the same Kesselring, during the conversation, he admitted the need for clarification. Moreover, Rommel, in a meeting of an hour and a half - strangely balanced and

The deployment of the ACIT on 23 December

Schizzo n. 23

LO SCHIERAMENTO DELL'ACIT ALLA DATA DEL 23 DICEMBRE



objective - occurred on December 23 had insisted that what was meant by "*hold out as long as possible*"? In his view the resistance *to the bitter end* meant *to sacrifice* so entailed the risk of annihilation; while the expression *as long as possible* resulted in *up to the maximum point without, however, risking annihilation*. Bastico had shrugged and, keeping in mind the messages sent to him from Rome, he had expressed the opinion that *as long as possible* were to be understood *as long as there is life, that is, until the destruction of the forces*. All that remained was to ask for an official clarification and Bastico returned to the office with the Comando Supremo:

"Checked out resistance positions of Buerat it is as I understood as an order to give them battle on the ground forces. So I ordered Marshal Rommel.

Then came radio 34157/Op. the Duce, who says to resist "as long as possible", & even this order, which to me confirms the previous, I give a verbatim statement to Marshal Rommel.

Except that Marshal Rommel has repeatedly expressed the opinion that hold out as long as possible means to resist until at when you run the risk of seeing circumvented or large units destroyed. There is doubt that such an interpretation, the current mood Marshal Rommel, leads to fighting for time & ready to withdrawal as soon pronounce enemy pressure.

That is I think wrong: the battle entails its own risks, including the annihilation of large units in the unfortunate event.

However, to define once and for all with Marshal Rommel this vital issue, I would like to have confirmation from you that my - & not, I say no, his- exact interpretation of your orders, for me is very clear.

Of course I confirm to be indispensable, even for moral reasons, ready influx important means reinforcing & supplies always promised, but so far not come" ⁽⁴²⁾.

Once again we must recognize that the final condition - the realization that material could no longer feed on illusions - removed meaning and value to the proclaimed intention to accept the risk of a battle.

While taking issue with certain views of Rommel and despite enduring more and more fatigue certain attitudes of German, Bastico not close our eyes to reality, he was very willing to keep it quiet. He knew that after the threat of circumvention by British light columns reported in 30-40 kilometers south of Sirte, the ACIT had to order the recovery of the 15th *Panzer*, which in the night was brought back to the position defensive. He knew, from Mancinelli, Rommel, appreciated the arrival of some tanks and six pieces of 88 of the new model, the tendency was to intervene with all his armored units against an attempt to circumvent short range from the south. He knew that at noon on Christmas units of the 4th Light Arm. Bd. had entered Sirte.

In light of all this, on December 26 he felt the need to insist in no uncertain terms by the Comando Supremo. Although Rommel, now fixed with the retreat, tended to see in any event, albeit modest

or not, found a dangerous threat, his nervousness – he wrote - found full justification in blatant inferiority means that, despite promises, remained unchanged. In particular, concerned about the issue of fuel. A summary calculation indicated a requirement of at least 600 tons of gasoline and 300 of diesel fuel which escort to conduct combat maneuvered, of course beyond the ordinary supplies ⁽⁴³⁾.

"Such an assessment – he continued – is honest. I am convinced that if Rommel had had fuel in the withdraw from Agheila he have dealt severe blows to the enemy. It is sad to note that failure to inflow from Italy has prevented these precious achievements. "

Then he continued even more sharply, it was regrettable that, just as he was about to start a decisive battle for Libya and perhaps for the war, difficulties supplies could limit the commander's decision and led him to rash decisions. It was necessary, therefore, provide *"exceptional means and without delay of a day (...). Exceptional supply is prerequisite to defend himself"*⁽⁴⁴⁾.

At that moment took place a new conversation between Kesselring and Cavallero had just returned from Africa. No one knew exactly the course of the fight, Kesselring, however, as a result of numerous calculations, recognized the tremendous difficulty of simultaneously supplying Tunisia and Tripolitania. And also expressed the view that Bastico had, yes, every intention of resisting at Buerat, but at the same time began already to think of a possible retreat; where Rommel was clearly oriented to leave more than in a hurry. With this in mind - here's the news - he admitted that *"we should prepare the retreat to save the mobile troop "*, bearing in mind the enormous difficulties of a retreat in mass.

It was so touched, but it is unknown what exact terms, the question -Another novelty - the replacement of Rommel and the constitution of an Italian army ⁽⁴⁵⁾.

In the afternoon, Cavallero studied the situation envisaged by the African operations. The inferiority of the ACIT was enough to exclude can hold indefinitely the British pressure; However, it was believed that *"if the ACIT undertakes really thoroughly with all the energy and without mental reservation, can be successfully frustrated the first proximity attempt of the enemy force against Buerat" (!)*. After that the retreat in Tunisia seemed inevitable and useful, of course, taking care to begin now to remove elements ready to use for coastal defense and anti-aircraft, as well as organs of Intendenza and local services. Ultimately, according to the office operations, it was to begin the transfer to what is not essential; accepting at first a defensive battle at Buerat; escape a second battle, predictably much more expensive due to the larger effort by the enemy.

The memo, to be presented to Mussolini and probably compiled according to the thought of Cavallero (preserves corrections in his own hand), ended with a conclusion frankly convoluted and twisted:

"The delicacy of this operation is that it must be done while in Tunisia it is buying the necessary space, now insufficient. It is therefore a *conditio sine qua non** that the withdrawal of the ACIT happen in a time frame that allows the realization of this condition now.

Then it remains to be seen whether, in the complex coordination of action will be possible and profitable to compete in the mobile forces of Rommel actions needed to take the space, namely those in the direction of Tebessa" ⁽⁴⁶⁾.

So Cavallero went to Palazzo Venezia together with the Gen. Ambrosio. In his diary reads the record of a topic: "Constitution of Italian army in AS. Removal of Rommel."

The guidelines for the top commander in Libya were written in these circumstances and indeed constituted a major step forward. It recognized that a resistance pushed to the annihilation of the army would have no purpose; that the power of the defense Buerat in terms of substantial influx of resources and materials was not foreseeable; that the duration of resistance at Buerat was a limit in the impossibility to supply simultaneously the two theaters of war, Tunisian and Libyan; that the retreat into Tunisia represented the final act of the struggle in Libya ⁽⁴⁷⁾.

Kesselring, which was shown, approved and added, probably by way of moral support, which Hitler personally followed things and was of the same opinion. "*But we must make sure that Rommel has more confidence in himself*," he said. It was unfair: trust Rommel directly dependent on gasoline. The comments of tactical character that followed did not sound objective: "*The British armored division that threatens Rommel is ridiculous a force, we must destroy it*."

That evening Cavallero called the Gen. Gandin, handed him directives for Bastico and commissioned him to recommend the need for the last two months (week, week less) the difficult task of withdrawing ⁽⁴⁸⁾.

On the 28th, at noon, Kesselring returned to Palazzo Vidoni, headquarters of the Comando Supremo. He carried the thought of the Führer on some important points. Having to admit the failure of the calculations to support the fight in Tripoli, the withdraw step by step of the ACIT Buerat from the line of *chotts* became obvious choice and the reconditioning of the positions of Gabes was urgent. To implement this operation with gradualness and thus to obtain the maximum gain of time, it was necessary to ensure Rommel a quantity of fuel sufficient to enable him to conduct the maneuver with a minimum of elasticity. This is the substance of the German strategic direction. On this occasion, Kesselring informed that the issue of a unified command in Africa, dependent on the Comando Supremo, or more precisely '*the Duce*', as well as the creation of Italian army did not seem

*Latin = an indispensable condition

meet objections from OKW. In any case he advocated the measure to the Führer.

In the evening, Mussolini approved the directives.

Gandin arrived in Tripoli on the evening of the 29th and found doubts and discontent. Two days before the British advanced elements had made contact with the German security advanced structure on the *wadi* Bei el-Chebiri. It not now is worth more worthwhile to stay on site, also the 90th Light, the 580th Recon. Bn. and the 21st *Panzer* had ebbed, in batches, to the positions of Buerat.

In light of these events, on the 28th Bastico had gone to the command of the XXI Corp, fifty kilometers west of Buerat, hobnobbing with the two commanders of the army corps, Navarini and Biton, and Rommel⁽⁴⁹⁾. The topics were the usual. The enemy seemed approaching with four divisions and 350 tanks. The defensive organization of the ACIT showed wide ranges easily detectable. So far refueling was limited to an average of 110 tons day: a drop in the bucket. Where the resistance at Buerat it stayed only static, you could take for granted the rapid breakdown of the formation and the green light to the 8th Army for Tripoli. On the evening bulletin of the ACIT read:

"From 12/29 onwards beginning now fighting for position of Buerat. The army intends to conduct this fight offensively from the right wing positions, as soon as there is sufficient fuel. If and when this will be, is uncertain for the moment."

When, therefore, Gandin handed directives of the Comando Supremo⁽⁵⁰⁾, he found a rather disheartened Bastico. Under the circumstances, he shared the view of Rommel that once engaged the battle, the risk of annihilation would become enormous. On the other hand, only you are accepting the battle you could hope to impose a considerable time to stop. So he was resigned to the idea of a resistance to the bitter end, it being understood that in order not to be crushed on site needed, within ten days, 1,170 trucks and his fuel. Alternatively, you could fall back the infantry on the Homs- Tarhuna before the attack the British.

Now, of course, he required a new meeting. It took place the 31st in Misrata between Bastico and Rommel with the respective heads of the G.S., Gandin for the Comando Supremo and Mancinelli. Bastico came straight to the point. He clarified that his earlier orders had traced those received from Rome and put in evidence that the new provided directives to "*hold out as long as possible on the position of Buerat*", which resulted in a period of time estimated to be a few weeks (Gandin Cavallero had already told him that he wanted a few months of breathing). In front of the net, "*This is impossible!*" Rommel, admitted through clenched teeth: "*I know!*". Gandin then intervened, meaning that the period of one or two months had to be reported not only to the line of Buerat, but rather to the whole of the resistance

carried out in succession in time to Buerat, Homs, Tripoli, Zuara, Gabes.

Rommel immediately calmed down: "*This is certainly possible!*" He said, but Bastico replied to Gandin that strictly speaking the directives were very explicit on time to gain at Buerat, without compromising the safety of the army. However, he wanted to know the maximum, according to Rommel, a defense in place. This was exactly the point of contrast.

"The time that I can keep - said Rommel - does not depend on me, but from the enemy, especially since I was now ordered to defend these positions as long as possible so but not to destroy the Army! The execution of the order that is given to me is really an art! We have to have a lot of capacity to do this!

Currently the enemy gradually, but systematically, it is worn under our positions; his eyes are strained on our positions; Also south of the line tents with his exploring elements westward.

The experience of recent battles showed that the enemy loves the method of frontally retain a position with much fire and go around it at a distance greater than the range (...).

Every time we were able to free ourselves at the last minute, but we never had enough forces to oppose the enemy, because the non motorized forces must be promptly withdrawn. If we had not done, they would be enemy's prey! (...).

How long these motorized forces will keep positions, this depends on the pressure of the enemy. They will do it until you can, but I can not even prescribe to individual units as they must keep., Because this one can judge only the commander on the spot. If I order a regimental commander to resist, for example, until tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, then I must also take responsibility for the consequences of this order. If this regiment is destroyed, the responsibility is mine!

Not in the spirit of the Comando Supremo of the forces to lose in these fights, but the purpose is to lead the fight for a long time and prevent the enemy from advancing. We must therefore have confidence in lower commanders, which take as long as possible (...)"

To withdraw the infantry (30,000 men) beyond Horns, staggered, with no more than 500 trucks available, it took at least eight days. Therefore Rommel insisted:

"Then I would not expose myself to the charge of having abandoned the Italian troops in the positions, I always speak of non-motorized. The last time, in Marsa el-Brega, I managed to bring them up to Buerat (...). It is impossible to withdraw the Italian divisions, when they are already in close contact with the enemy. It is impossible and can not do! If you want to avoid annihilation."

Essentially, Rommel wanted to start immediately the retrograde movement to be sure you can drive away the infantry out of the pressure of the enemy. The move would follow the same pattern used to go from El Agheila to Buerat. Contact, held only by motorized units, should not turn into combat, but limited - to Buerat and some intermediate positions - to force an opponent to deploy. And, just to cut short any

future discussions, Rommel demanded that, once taken off half the infantry, were left to him only the power to adjust the timing of the maneuver. Otherwise, the Comando Supremo could entrust the army to another commander! ⁽⁵¹⁾.

It was clear the intention not to exercise never a real resistance, too subject, objectively, the danger of hooking by British and, consequently, of the destruction.

For Bastico instead, prescription at Buerat stay as much as possible, while avoiding the risk of losing the ACIT, held exhaustive, whatever Gandin had said. Then the retreat to be held naturally and systematically to later times, had to be preceded by the actual contact *between* the two armies. Of course, he also included the danger, but acting otherwise would not have complied with the order.

In conclusion, Gandin not overbalanced it, however, is seen as he could, given that the contradiction was inherent in their formulation of the directives; Rommel reserved to synthetically present a study on how the maneuver would have seen take place; Bastico assured the immediate forwarding to the Comando Supremo of a request for a decision does not give rise to misinterpretation and more doubts ⁽⁵²⁾.

The same night Rommel sent to the Comando Superiore Libya a summary of his operational thinking ⁽⁵³⁾ and put Bastico aware of the fundamental features of the defense under construction on the positions of Homs-Gussabat- Tarhuna-Garian ⁽⁵⁴⁾.

2. THE WITHDRAW ON THE LINE OF MARETH (January 1943).

There seems no doubt that in a moment so tense and in a tactical situation so difficult, little has been done by the Comando Supremo and by the OKW for alleviating the burden of the struggle, at least psychologically, those who led operations Libya. The limited clarity of vision in the strategic field was added a strange way to complicate things. Certainly there was now the Rommel problem.

While Bastico formulated his questions, Gandin wrote directly to Cavallero:

"My personal impression of the interview today. Rommel is obsessed by the fear of not reaching Gabes in Tunisia before being occupied by the enemy. He complains of being treated as a subordinate to the fact that he is given special orders, which means you do not have confidence in him.

It seems that the head of the G.S. (Col. Hayerlein) does not agree with the thoughts of Rommel & believes can give it a shot stop the enemy as long as fuel is not missing. This would take also Bastico.

If you do not accept the thesis of Rommel should replace him because he performs poorly inconsistent orders with the intentions manifested by him, because, as has repeatedly expressed, does not want to expose himself again to being accused of abandoned the Italian troops" ⁽⁵⁵⁾.

He called once more, and with more force, because, Cavallero would first talk with Kesselring, who knew oriented to a long resistance in Tripoli. On the morning of New Year's Eve, at about 10:30, then the Field Marshal received and commented on the different views of Bastico and Rommel. Not going, neither one nor the other; but above all he was anxious to keep the reins of the situation: "*Rommel since he left El Alamein – he accused - no more fighting. I am opposed to give him complete freedom of action, because we have seen how he behaved when he had it.*" Kesselring agreed on this danger. In his view one could find a concrete indication "*establish for the symptom of withdrawal from [= the line] Garian-Tarhuna a limit of four to six weeks.*" Meanwhile the ACIT had to act offensively against the enemy spearheads, much less than his strength. "*This Rommel- he said - can hold for a long time without destroying the army*" ⁽⁵⁶⁾.

The issue of a British contact preserved only by a proportion of the 8th Army was true, but one should not underestimate the ability of the opponent to excessively mass quickly where and when he wanted to. the date of January 2, the SIM gave the following framework: three or four infantry brigades (of which two New Zealanders) and an armored brigade deployed on the *wadi* Bei el-Chebir; an armored brigade more to the rear, inward; other three brigades of infantry and a armored in the area of Sirte. In fact, the 30th Corp of Leese, that is, the British advanced disposition, had the 50th and the 51st Inf. Div. straddling the Via Balbi, the 2nd New Zealand Inf. Div., and the 7th Arm. Div. ⁽⁵⁷⁾ further south. In corp reserve was the 23rd Arm. Bd. with *Valentine*. Further east was the 22nd Arm. Bd. in army reserve.

At 17:30 of 1 January, Cavallero resumed talks with Kesselring. Having conferred with Mussolini, he was able to show the text of the response prepared for Bastico. After some changes by mutual agreement, the telegram was sent. It began by considering extreme and opposing each other interpretation of the two senior commanders in Libya, as well as both in contrast to previous directives of the Comando Supremo, reiterated as "unchanged". Then he stated: the battle on the defensive positions of Buerat with all forces had to be excluded; the dropping of the infantry had to be carried out of the direct pressure of the enemy, so he could also start immediately; the gain of time depended on the indispensable movement of mobile units against the most advanced British elements. The goal to be achieved resulted in the gain of three weeks prior to move to the line of Homs and the same number before reaching the entrenched camp in Tripoli. As part of these key points, it could be granted leeway to Rommel, whose incumbent is responsible for obtaining the desired six weeks. Moreover, given the need to coordinate the retreat to Tripoli with the situation in Tunisia, the Comando Supremo reserved for action with subsequent orders ⁽⁵⁸⁾.

Gen. Mancinelli, who caught sight of the dispatch to relay to Rommel, was appalled and he retained a painful memory, enough to express themselves so hard even after a long time:

"It is really inconceivable - he wrote - that the offices of a General Staff, after three years of experience of war can be released such a document, which intertwine and overlap each other absolutely incompatible concepts: avoid annihilation, that is say to avoid being engaged the adversary, and at the same time lead a counter-offensive maneuver so effective that ensure a gain of time strictly established as the minimum: not less than six weeks. It is obvious even to the layman who has been determined that we should not expose annihilation, facing an opponent clearly predominant, the pace of the operation, counter-maneuver or not, would be basically imposed by the attitude and enthusiasm of the enemy attacker (...) " ⁽⁵⁹⁾.

But the responsibility of such directives not only went back to Cavallero. Kesselring had a not insignificant part of guilt. He started a series of deeply held convictions: that the position of Buerat was naturally strong; that the relationship between the opposing armored units facing each other - the DAK and XX Corp against a couple of armored brigades - was entirely favorable to the Axis; that, however, the advanced units of the 8th Army could be kept at bay with weak forces; that ACIT is not found at all in dramatic fuel crisis; Rommel let fall excellent opportunities to improve its overall situation.

It ignores the extent to which Cavallero and the Comando Supremo shared the certainties of Kesselring, but they should be considered much better informed, thanks to the continuous notes evidence of Bastico and Mancinelli. In those circumstances, it is strange persistence in rejecting the reality that the troubles of the ACIT depended primarily by insufficient supplies; and that just such testimony prevented Rommel to take any initiative and forced him to retreat to any threat of turning. Consequently, establishing a determination to gain time "*to be able to carry out the evacuation of the elements and materials useful for the further conduct of the war*" - clearing moreover even started, although the question was on the mat for at least a couple of weeks -, it was without being achieved, unless we accept the risk of losing the armored units and then the army.

In the margins of the meeting, he went back to the forefront of the problem of the command in Africa. Cavallero had received a new explosive telegram Bastico:

"I consider it my duty as commander report that I hear from all sides the work of detrimental & depressing actions that plays Marshal Rommel both directly and through his officers. Everything confirms his precise plans to accelerate with or without enemy pressure his withdrawing into Tunisia with moral & materials consequences of exceptional gravity. His work in Libya can not therefore be that bad" ⁽⁶⁰⁾.

Not to take head-on the delicate topic, Cavallero suggested that orders designating the commander only in Africa to depart from the Comando Supremo, but were processed by a “close cooperation between the Chief of Staff General and Marshal Kesselring.” To which, of course, Kesselring argued that if he went to the Supreme Commander for this task all would have considered himself a member of the Comando Supremo.

Bastico, for his part, conveyed exactly the directives to the ACIT and, given the need for ten days to move the infantry back to the Homs, authorized the immediate start of the movement, for whose execution granted the 500 trucks of the III Truck Bn. of the Intendenza.

Predictably, Rommel accepted the freedom of action but provided they receive timely and regular fuel and simply be required to gain the maximum time possible (no constraint of six weeks, then) in the two days of retreat until Tripoli. Bastico replied in a very balanced, explaining that the deadline set by the Comando Supremo are of value guidance that exhaustive; But at the same time he said flatly in Rome that the fixed idea of running to Tunisia was likely to Rommel who exaggerated the danger of annihilation, so that the times would be accelerated, leading to losses of men and staff. *“But this bad, although monitored by frequent contacts, not east curable because inherent in the man, as I have often represented”* he added philosophically ⁽⁶¹⁾.

On the morning of the 4th, Gen. Gandin went to the ACIT together with the Chief of Staff the Comando Superiore, Gen. Giglioli. They were received very cordially by Rommel and Col. Bayerlein. According to these you could count to remain at Buerat twenty days without any problems, while appreciating the British forces in six or seven divisions with 6000 wheeled or tracked vehicles supplied to large units in the first row. However Rommel formulated specific requests for the needs of the front (400 tons of fuel per day for the German troops and thirty anti-tank pieces with a week of ammunition) and the rear (employment of Gafsa and assignment to the ACIT of central Tunisia, up to the Tebessa-Kairouan-Sousse alignment instead to the parallel of Gabes as established by the Supreme Commander), hoping that the army was not considered a “stepchild” in terms of supplies.

Gandin, in the report to the Comando Supremo, was careful to emphasize the excellent impression given *“as if now he [Rommel] again saw many possibilities for his military glory”*.

The last word was uttered by Bastico. The same day, of the 4th sent a message to the ACIT with the official response of Rome: *“(…) the Comando Supremo, confirmed my interpretation, states that time limits are indicative & have to make every effort to overcome them rather than shorten them. Your responsibility is short in gaining as much time as possible”* ⁽⁶²⁾. Finally, the guidelines were

adapted to the harsh reality of the circumstances and in the sense requested by Rommel. But how many discussions! and especially those new frictions were exacerbated tempers, caused distrust and increased mutual distrust just when it was needed the greater harmony!

Clarified the policy, the problems that the Comando Superiore was faced involved three distinct sectors.

First it was necessary to organize to defend positions that would allow a minimum of security of the army behind the armor. The issue had already started, although with all the limitations resulting from the lack of availability of the materials to strengthen. This was the line Garian- Tarhuna-Homs, the eastern edge of the fort of Tripoli and the French positions of Mareth a barrier to the defilade of the Gabes. At the same time it made it essential to guarantee the balance possession of communications between Tunisia and Tripolitania and the northern area of Sfax - Sousse, intended to accommodate the rear of the ACIT, once it flowed on the line of Mareth.

Second, you had to evacuate into Tunisia what was recoverable in Tripolitania in manpower, equipment and materials for the purpose of their further use in the fight, and also developing the without use of the port of Tripoli before it fell into British hands, and a number of interruptions of the main infrastructure on the Via Balbi. Incidentally, the question submitted by the Comando Supremo on the convenience of a defense to the bitter end in Tripoli, in analogy to what happened at Stalingrad, Bastico replied with an answer that did not allow illusions: the resistance would last very little, the city would come out destroyed, the defense would achieve material results definitely negative and a few moral doubts.

Third, there was to think about the withdrawal of troops of the Libyan Sahara - about 6,000 men diluted in many isolated places - and principals of Tripolitania. In September 1942, the Libyan Sahara had hired an organization on three bands. The outermost, from el-Gatrun Bir Zelten (south of el-Agheila), acquitted supervisory functions, delay and attrition; the central one, from Gath in Marada, had the task of resistance to the bitter end; the most rearward from Ubari oasis Giofra, represented the basis for the collection of more advanced units, to defend the hinterland of Tripolitania. Of course, the events at the coastal strip, and that the advance of the 8th Army, had caused the abandonment of the eastern part of the bands advanced and central. But there remained the bulk and you could not miss it, especially since already made themselves known cases of desertion among the Libyan troops. The operation, to be harmonized with the retreat of the ACIT, was planned in two phases. First the aforementioned units would gather on the *gebelico* bow, from Nalut to Garian, passing also to the employment of Gen. Roncaglia, with the task of giving protection to the southern flank of the armored army both during his stay on the line of Homs, and in the course of the next

withdrawal into Tunisia. Wanting, however, to separate as soon as the troops from the Libyan nationals, in anticipation of the nearby need to proceed to the total dismissing of the latter, it was expected that the Libyan units stationed between Nalut and Giado under the command of the *Royal Corps Libyan Troops* (Gen. Buttà) and domestic ones were gathered between Giado and Garian under the commander of the Libyan Sahara (Gen. Mannerini). Subsequently, as part of the retreat of the ACIT, the units in question would be merged on Nalut and from there went to Tunisia, heading to Fom Tatahouine (sketch n. 24).

We must say that the evacuation of Fezzan was more or less coincide with the drive towards the north of the troops in Gen. Leclerc. If Italy for the Saharan front was always of secondary importance, for the de Gaullist movement played a value much more important because of the obvious political repercussions. On September 22, De Gaulle had sent strict guidelines to Leclerc to seize the oasis of Fezzan and arrange a basic aim of Tripoli, meanwhile occupying Gat and Ghadames, near the Algerian border. To avoid unwanted interference by British inevitable political implications, De Gaulle doubled safety advice: Leclerc did not have to take major initiatives except in conjunction with the moves of the 8th Army, unlike the Italian forces they would have reduced to a bad match and the British would intervene in the Fezzan. And that, precisely, it was necessary to avoid it.

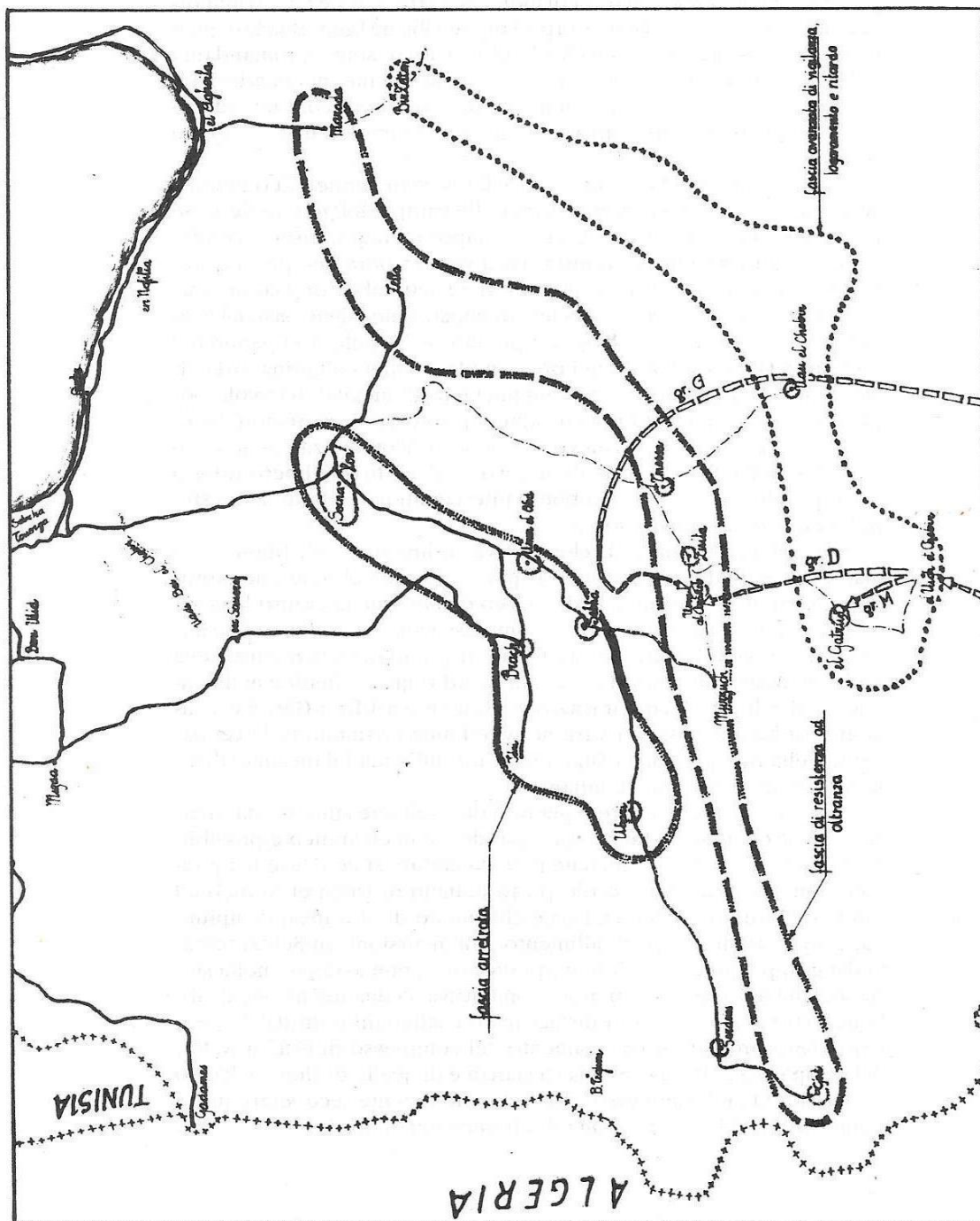
So, on December 14, Leclerc ordered to Col. Ingold, military commander of Chad, to start his columns two days later, the 8th Army during the attack against the positions of el-Agheila. It was a total of 4,800 men and 780 vehicles, articulated into three battle groups. The first objective was to design a forward base at Uigh el-Chebir and the threat to the communications of the line Hon-Sebha-Ubari-Gat. The performance turned out bad for various reasons and the only result was the occupation of unmanned Uigh el-Chebir, helpful but balanced by the alarm issued from the Italian posts.

Leclerc had to review the plan. He wanted to affect the Saharan tracks controlling el-Gatrun, occupying Umm el-Araneb and possibly Sebha. The move, which began on December 26, ended on January 4 with the fall of the small Italian post of Umm el-Araneb by Battle Group D, the encirclement of el-Gatrun made from tactical group M and the failure of the raid Sebha tempted by Battle Group G. Subsequent developments will not have a lot of history, because the Comando Superiore had no intention of abandoning the Saharan detachments to their fate and since 1 January had ordered the withdrawal of the forces of Gath of Nalut, the forces Brach and Sebha to Garian and that of Hon also to Garian. Each "force" would naturally recover all the many minors units before heading north.

The situation in Fezzan as of January 4, 1943

Schizzo n. 24

LA SITUAZIONE NEL FEZZAN ALLA DATA DEL 4 GENNAIO



The move by the ACIT from Buerat to Mareth can be divided into three stages, essentially determined by enemy progress. The first of them (2-14 January) will cover the recoil from Buerat to Homs, of all infantry and gathering on the *gebelico* bow Nalut-Garian units of the Sahara and the garrisons of Tripolitania. The second (15-19 January), the most complex and delicate, will focus of the retreat to Homs of the mobile units remaining in Buerat and the beginning of the retreat of the infantry to the eastern city of Tripoli. The third phase will be: in the abandonment of Tripolitania.

Rommel had set the retrograde movement of the infantry on a procedure in stages, with stops at two intermediate alignments: Bir el-Mangaa Sedada and Misurata-Bani Walid. Devoid of tactical significance, had been determined by the need for a shuttling back and forth to the vehicles, however, having to also assume a few stops in the rear, Rommel had called them "resistance lines of motorized units" (sketch n. 25).

According to the plan, in the night on January 3 about a third of the troops of the divisions *Pistoia*, *Spezia* and *Giovani Fascisti* they left positions of Buerat-el Faschia with absolutely no pressure or British attack. In the days following the easing of positions continued, while the infantry divisions over took the armored and motorized units.

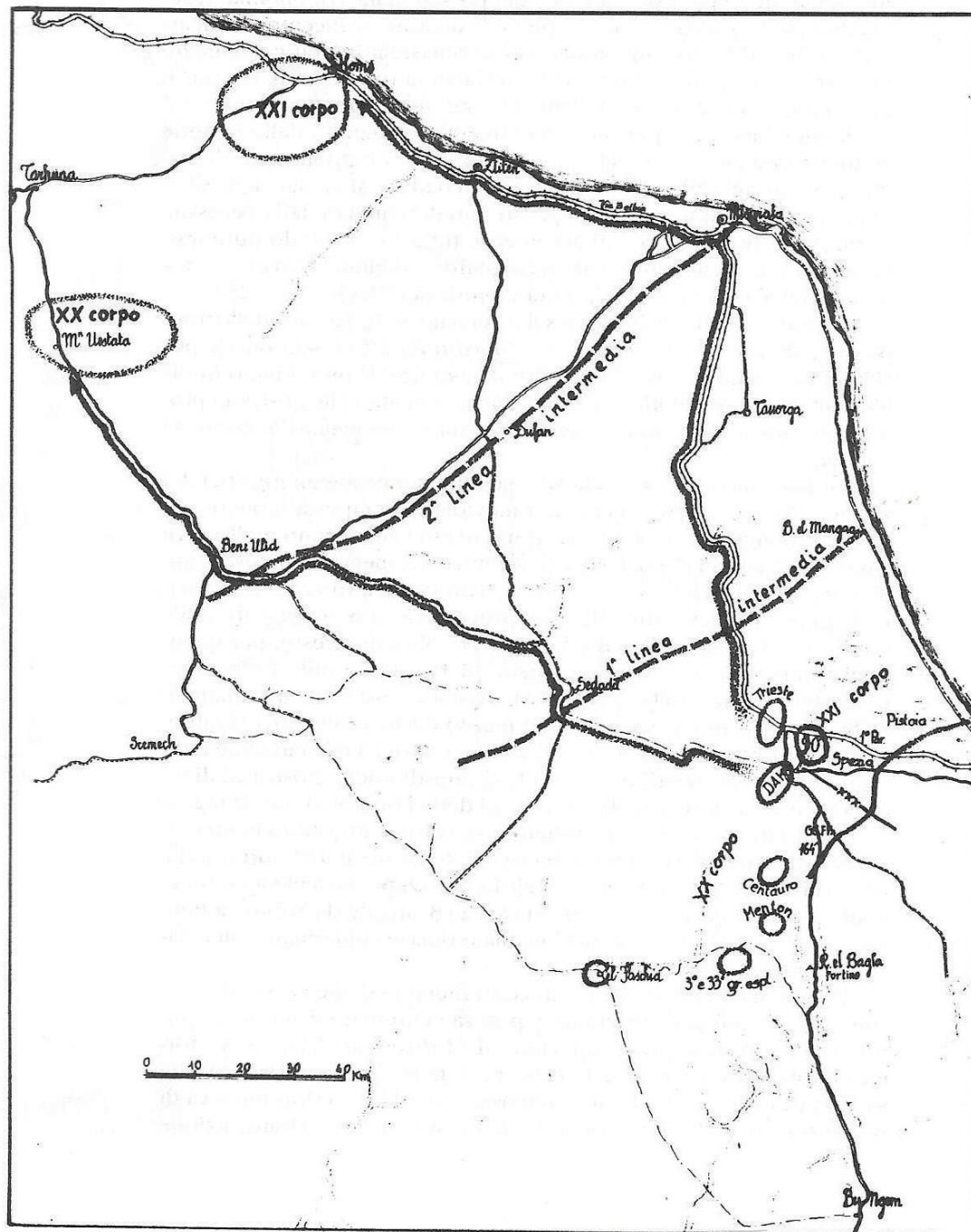
Stasis tactic was accounted for in the logistic problems of the enemy. On 3 and 4 January a violent storm swept the port of Benghazi with damage at the time seemed very serious, five merchant sunk and three badly damaged; considerable, though not in a determinant way, failures to port equipment. The plan of the supplies, which provided for a discharge of 2,300 tons/Day in Benghazi, then suffered a stopping blow, as already a few days after the average delivery about 1,800 tons daily. What for ACIT would constitute a windfall, the 8th Army was considered a means disaster. Moreover Montgomery had planned something and retouched the ready operating design. Destined the 50th Inf. Div. to protect the positions of el-Agheila and moved it to 30th Corp, which gave the order to not push hard action in the coastal sector, where he had met a serious resistance. At the same time he decided to stop the 10th Corp in the area of Benghazi, taking away all the vehicles to boost the work of those who already being supplied via land by the 8th Army via Tobruk, Benghazi, to el-Agheila and beyond. January 15 was confirmed as the date for the beginning of the offensive.

On the other hand, even in the midst of setbacks and the nervous strain of Churchill, Montgomery could continue his program without undue concern. On December 31, *Ultra* had provided new information on the friction between Rommel and his superiors and on the course of action that the commander of the ACIT he intended to follow: withdrawal of the infantry positions Tarhuna-Homs, action

The withdraw plan of the ACIT from the position of Buerat

Schizzo n. 25

IL PIANO DI RIPIEGAMENTO DELL'ACIT
DALLE POSIZIONI DI BUERAT



of the motorized troop at Buerat long as possible and then rush back for them. In the first week of January, valuable new news: the Italian divisions were retreating to Homs; Axis was expecting an British attack on Buerat January 13 and it was feared a one American in the area of Gafsa⁽⁶³⁾.

Meanwhile Cavallero and Kesselring had seen fit to fly to Tunisia to Tripoli and to see for himself the progress of operations. On the 5th, he arrived in Homs, holding the meeting with Bastico. The next day, at the command post the ACIT, the one with Rommel. The situation was clear: two-thirds of the Italian troops were already lagging behind in the area of Tauorga and the remainder, still in the line, would be motorized. As for the real possibility of facing a violent clash, there was not much, because of the incompleteness and inconsistency of even anti-tank obstacle (moat and minefields). Actually the enemy had shown very little aggressive, but there was no doubt that by now he realized the maneuver implemented by the Axis. In addition, numerous clues were considered likely an imminent British effort against the south wing of the army, which forced certain changes on the deployment, designed to strengthen the right with mobile troops and push Southeast a advanced structure a particularly agile, made with recon. groups (sketch n. 26).

In the event cited the ACIT have a fighting withdraw: the XXI Corp, a Brigade of the *Luftwaffe* and the 90th Light along the Via Balbi; XX Corp and DAK along the track for Tarhuna. The more painful sign remained in the unsatisfactory restoration of the equipment. The DAK put in the line just a fifth of the *Panzer* and a share of the organic anti-tank and a third of the artillery. Continuing like this, the enemy might not have even been arrested at Gabes.

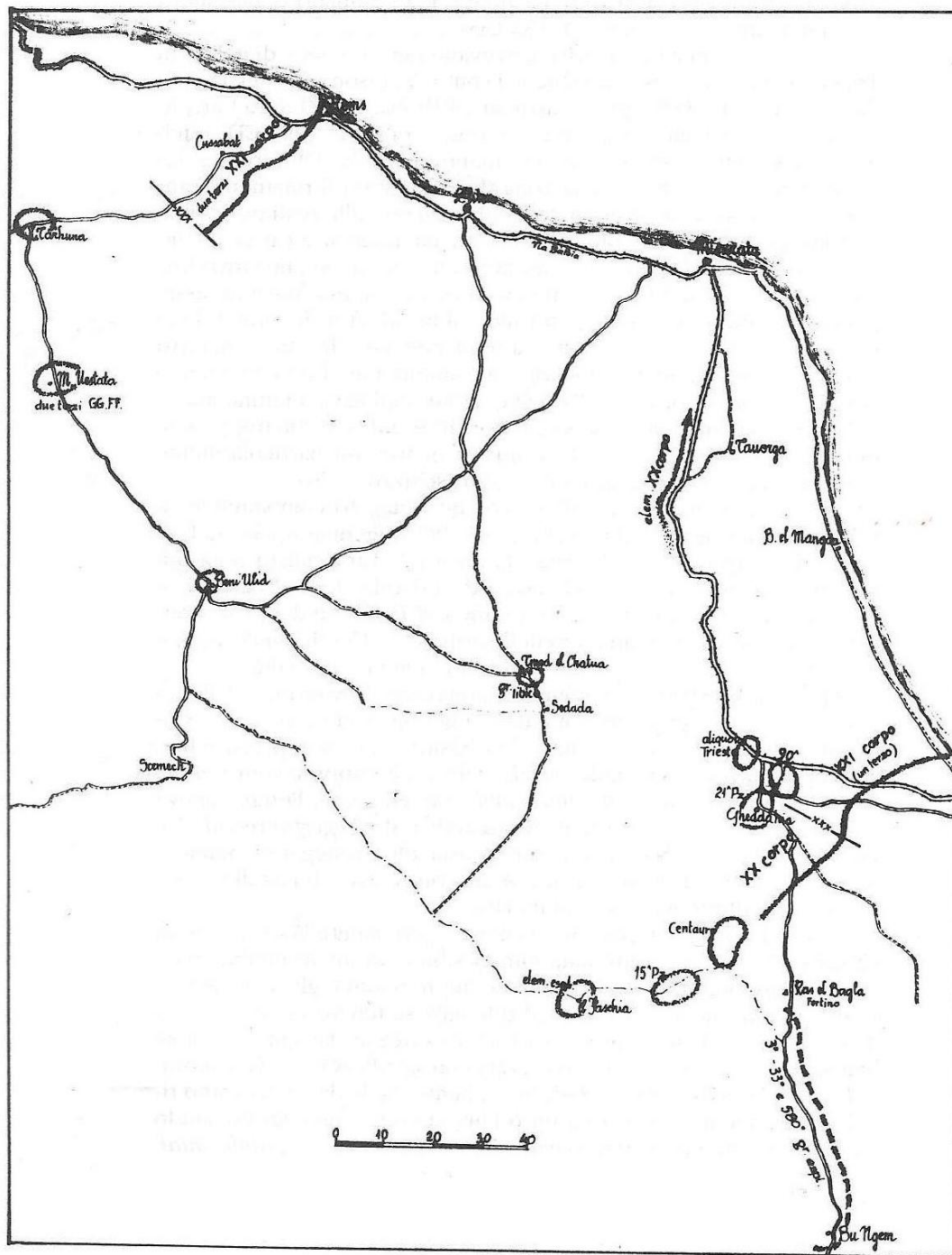
After exposure from Rommel, Kesselring intervened and his comment was intoned belief has often expressed to the Supreme Commander. All in all, the British divisions in the front row did not seem able to inspire many apprehensions because "*air superiority is on the side of the Axis*" and Gen. Fougier had assured the aid of the R. Aeronautica to the *Fliegerführer Afrika*. Therefore he would not meet the ACIT obstacles to fall back slowly to Tunisia, where the line of *chotts*, already strong in itself, is its preparation under Italian care.

Then it was the turn of Cavallero. Openly admitted the decision to evacuate Libya, proved impossible for an acceptable flow of supplies. All hopes in this regard and the enormous efforts were shipwrecked and facing the dilemma of whether to keep Tunisia or Tripolitania could not leave any doubt. The serious deficiencies in power of the armored army did not mean "*that we consider the ACIT as a stepchild* ", but that the difficulties were found to really exceed all the efforts made by the Comando Supremo. However, "*I insist be given as soon as possible, some*

The deployment of the ACIT on January 7

Schizzo n. 26

LO SCHIERAMENTO DELL'ACIT ALLA DATA DEL 7 GENNAIO



pat on the nose of the enemy not to remain completely inactive, which would be against us
 "(64).

On January 7, Kesselring and Cavallero went by plane to Medenine to visit the French fortifications of Mareth. As more or less knew, that they did not constitute a good support, but to be completely fixed. It was to restore the old fortifications abandoned and half-destroyed and the effectiveness of integrating with fieldwork, passive obstacles and means of arrest. And that was the least of: the major concerns addressed to the scarcity of strengthening materials, the difficulty to receive the indispensable working means and transport on site, the deficiency of skilled labor. The direction of the complex organization had already been entrusted to Gen. De Stefanis, however, at least for the moment, he was simply using all kinds of gimmicks. For those efforts might be fulfilled and how much good will he would put the machine he could only proceed very slowly.

Cavallero, in agreement with Kesselring, established the formation of an *ad hoc* Italian-German General Staff at the Comando Supremo and decided to bring the number of workers now to 10,000 and then to 20,000. Even this was easier to order than make happen. They were used elements from services units when they became less essential to the needs of the theater of Tripolitano. He gathered staff from everywhere and restored and used to work even men already tried by long a stay of over 35 months in Libya and, therefore, gathered in Tripoli awaiting repatriation. It added that at some point the Arabs workers began to leave the sites because there was no French currency with which to pay them. Ultimately, the sum of ten thousand workers will be reached only in mid-February.

The two marshals returned to Rome convinced of the inevitability of tackling the problem of the person of Rommel. Kesselring knew I had to leave the 10th to travel to East Prussia to confer with Hitler, Cavallero did not hesitate to express the opinion "*personal and confidential*" that Mussolini believed desirable to replace the commander of the ACIT. Kesselring, who did not hide his dissatisfaction with the lack of recognition of the efforts made by the *Luftwaffe*, seems to have been limited to emphasize the diversity of operational concept: according to him the front of Tripolitana could and should be held with very few forces, making it easy to withdraw the remaining to Tunisia ⁽⁶⁵⁾.

We must say bluntly that the whole issue of the Command-in-Chief in Africa is considered by the Italian in a difficult prospect to define. There are no official documents of the Comando Supremo that touch the subject and the diary of the same Chief of Staff General, though implied, it appears to remain deliberately in general. For example, in reporting the summary of the interview had on January 13 with the King, is limited to one sentence:

"The King showed satisfaction when I gave him the news of the solution being developed with the OKW regarding the problem of command for operations in Africa."

However, two days before Cavallero had received Generals Ambrosio and Sciuero and during the conversation was somewhat unbalanced:

"A matter of command in North Africa- it reads in the diary-and solution adopted: Staff Joint Operations in Africa, reporting to the Comando Supremo. Orders paramount signed by Chief of Staff General, with the approval of the Führer."

It is useless to dwell in an easy criticism, too synthetic being precisely. However we will encounter later as well with Kesselring, the German partner, Cavallero expressed cautiously, almost in order to push forward at all, separately, their own idea about, while remaining conditions to edit it if you do not like ⁽⁶⁶⁾.

In a way another topic was left pending. Cavallero had mentioned Rommel during the conversation of January 6, perhaps recalling the observation made in passing a couple of weeks earlier by Kesselring, who wanted the 90th Light in Tunisia: once reached the ACIT line of Homs, would be sent the *Spezia* Inf. Div. to Sfax, where the presence of the Axis was still weak and fragmented? The negative response of Rommel, the discourse was finished then. But now intervened OKW, probably at the request of von Arnim or Kesselring, with the proposal to transfer the 164th Light to Sfax to oppose an expected American effort in the short term, towards the coast. Cavallero immediately instructed Bastico to consult the commander of the ACIT, taking care to point out that with the ceding of the division he must not give the impression of being able to accelerate their retreat. The Italian fears were justified. Not only it had to carry the West as used in the rest of the African country, but also it was necessary to gain time in favor of the defensive system of Mareth, in the opinion of the Comando Supremo, called for "*not less than two months*" to reach a level that would allow to the Army complete without major problems.

Rommel replied immediately. Held at the outset that, in principle each unit subtracted from the ACIT could only worsen the imbalance that already exists with the British 8th Army, a further weakening would lead to a decrease of the possible gain of time. Besides the impact of any enemy success in Sfax would have been very serious. If, therefore, the German 5th Army was not able to run for cover, it become inevitable to draw in the ACIT. Moreover:

"In this way - clarified - it must necessarily calculate that the army will probably be forced to withdraw relatively faster. What I will do

everything, even with reduced fighting force, to achieve the maximum gain of time for the evacuation of Tripolitania and for the arrangement of the positions of Mareth, I do not need to underscore."

That said, Rommel advanced some reservations on the use of 164th Light for this purpose. First its offensive ability was very poor: it had just 3,500 men, 15 anti-tank guns, three accompanying pieces and an battery of light howitzers; then you could count on it only for a defensive role. Then, the delicacy of his current sector required it to not touch it until the abandonment of the Buerat line. Even the solution to send a Italian division to Sfax did not seem effective, as the major unit, while with higher volume of artillery fire, seriously lacked transportation and therefore also was suitable for the simple defense of positions; also his transfer would take too long. Ultimately, if you really wanted to protect the southern Tunisia with appropriate forces to any task, we might as well send you the 21st *Panzer*, predestined as a army reserve in future defense of Mareth. The sacrifice made at Buerat appeared offset by the significant advantage gained at Sfax⁽⁶⁷⁾.

Bastico sniffed, biased judging the renunciation of the 21st *Panzer* and suggested instead of surrendering to the 5th Army the *Centauro* Arm. Div. (Gen. Calvi di Bergolo), namely the bulk of it already stationed north of Gabes and therefore already at hand⁽⁶⁸⁾. Not only its current task (garrison, facing north, the line of the 34th parallel) would in fact become superfluous once reinforced the area of Sfax, but the *Centauro* was not even considered to be indispensable to the positions of Mareth. However Cavallero, while making themselves fully aware of what it could mean the removal of the 21st *Panzer* from Tripolitania, considered the best solution by Rommel. As he explained to Mussolini, it was preferable that the retreat of the ACIT happen by choice not because of British pressure, especially considering that the enemy would allegedly tried to hook Rommel only in conjunction with the American attack on Tunisia.

The executive order was almost immediate. On the German proposal, it would limit the weakening of the ACIT the 21st to cede to the 15th *Panzer* main armament (tanks, artillery), to restore it in Sfax with the material already disembarked by OKW⁽⁶⁹⁾. However, the persistent invitation not to rush things, Rommel returned to repeat that everything depended on the vehemence and the consistency of the offensive British. "*I feel uncertain - pointed out -to keep the Mareth position away from the 8th Army for two months yet, now far beyond my current forces available*"⁽⁷⁰⁾.

Mancinelli also intervened on the subject. Rommel will not let the infantry engage, felt, and will only operate in retreat and possibly to take advantage of some enemy imprudence. In this regard, the withdrawal of the 164th Light would be very influential

nn the time to obtain; for against the removal of the 21st *Panzer* he would definitely weighed on responsiveness of the army. Apart from that, Rommel called for the immediate establishment of a unified command in North Africa, can be examined in a harmonious picture all the problems, and saw the work of Jan. De Stefanis in Mareth unrelated to the contingent possibility and necessity of the two armies. In fact only the rapid union of these could be the decisive to save the dreaded offensive on Sfax. Finally, continued Mancinelli, Rommel did not take kindly to the occupation of the line Mareth, as it would have resulted in the absorption of the entire ACIT. Better, therefore, prefer the cheaper defilade of Gabes, preservable with a part of the forces, while the rest of the army would be used offensively to the west.

On January 15, Kesselring, returning from Germany, went to the Comando Supremo. Dismissing the pleasantries, informed that the encirclement of the 6th Army of Paulus at Stalingrad, twenty-five divisions strong (about 250,000 men), and the general course of the war in Russia altered the situation and forced to re-examine the African problem in relation to the diminished availability of troops and vehicles. The Führer, on the other hand, considered it greatly improved the position of the Axis in Tunisia possible and a large gain time in Tripolitania by a defense movement. As for the northern Tunisia, the OKW had planned to send the remaining units of the *Hermann Goering* Arm. Div., with the 999th Light, of fifteen 105 and 150 batteries and a number of heavy batteries and anti-aircraft. With march battalions parked in Naples and part of the artillery mentioned it was intended to prepare two or three brigades, useful to reinforce the defensive line and make available for the dynamic reaction of the *Hermann Goering* and 10th *Panzer*, while at the same time would complete the 21st *Panzer* and the *Centauro*.

Regarding the areas of Sfax and Gabes, Kesselring did not seem inclined to draw on armored units of the 5th Army, and because it was necessary the Führer to authorize, and because in the event of breakage of the front judged easy penetration with a counterattack from north.

Cavallero realized at the OKW the extreme tension induced by the developments of the war on the eastern front⁽⁷¹⁾, but he was disappointed. In the memo presented to Mussolini, he emphasized how heavy appeared the conditioning caused by the reduction of German reinforcements: "*It makes us predict - He wrote -for a few months on the defensive, although active defense, with all the ensuing consequences.*" It seemed that Kesselring to overlook the offensive that at some point the British 8th Army would launch against the ACIT, not the difficulties that armored units of the German 5th army would meet for lack of logistical assistance, where direct restore a compromised situation in the field of Gabes.

Basically, the picture is very different from the one imagined. The long letter prepared for Hitler, with the intention to convince him of the opportunity to reconsider the design of a territorial objective represented by the Algerian border and the absolute need to maintain the program for North Africa, was not signed by Mussolini, who merely talk with Kesselring. But even if he signed it, it would not turn either Hitler or the OKW from the tragedy of Stalingrad.

And then there was the agonizing problem of supplies overseas. The situation envisaged by Gen. Raimondo, Senior Director of Transport, January 12 and referred to the forecasts for the entire month of January seemed dramatic. The Italian requirement amounted to a total of 80,000 tons, Broken down as follows:

Royal Army	68,000 tons (15,000 of which fuel and 7,800 of materials to reinforce the line of Mareth)
Royal Marina	2,000 tons.
Royal Aeronautics	5,000 tons.
Min. Italian Africa	5,000 tons. (For civilians).

As of January 6 had been landed in Africa 3,000 tons, But against the remaining 77,000 to send was a possibility of shipment of about 70,000 tons overall. Because you wanted to reserve half of the load of each ship for German needs, it appeared that 35,000 tons for the Germans receive almost entirely their needs⁽⁷²⁾, while the Italian deficit was around 50%. All this, of course, always the steamers departing rather than actually arrived at its destination. Any 'cut' to requests made by the three General Staffs obviously would not make everything fit on the chart.

A synthetic study done by the operations of the Comando Supremo on the question of the reorganization of the units of the ACIT had provided material for further pessimism. The Comando Superiore Libya had worked hard to give a structure to the Italian divisions actually getting some results. Except that what was received with the recovery of the recovered in the rear and therefore means, especially artillery, not always satisfying because outdated or not appropriate to the circumstances. It was therefore necessary to provide at least from the mother country with the intent of improving the efficiency of existing units. According to a summary calculation, while refusing to touch the already reduced organic levels, demand was about 30,000 men (including new units and complements) and 4,000 vehicles.

In turn, the ACIT had reported a deficiency of 34,000 men and 4,400 vehicles for the German troops. In conclusion, the hypothesis to allocate half of the total transport options (40,000 men and 5,000 vehicles per month) to the Axis forces in Tunisia and half

those of Tripolitania, to patch up the Italian-German units of the ACIT would take four months.

On 12 January, the *Desert Air Force* began the preliminary phase of the offensive on the entire area of the battle, despite the bitter conflict of Axis fighters. The bulk of the 30th Corp left the waiting areas on January 14 and the next day moved to "*occupy Tripoli, destroying any enemy force was preventing the advance.*" The deployment employed aimed to exert efforts to two wings, slightly staggered over time, with a less central penetration, able to intervene in favor of either. More precisely the enveloping group (7th Arm. Div. and 2nd Df New Zealand) was to attack at dawn along the direction Sedada – Beni Ulid- Tarhuna; the 51st *Highlanders* would attack late in the evening riding on Via Balbi; the 22nd Arm. Bd. was to be held between the two sets of forces. The structure of the command held joint account of the troops and, at least at first, turned out unusual to January Leese was given control of the operation of turning, while the action of the 51st *Highlanders* and progress of the 22nd Arm. Bd. was directed by the Army Command (sketch n. 27).

Many concerns could not exist. The interception of messages *Enigma* had just put Montgomery aware of the start of the 21st *Panzer*, Rommel's intentions and instructions of the OKW. The result obtained is revealed more than reassuring, although only referred to the 30th Corp: 450 British tanks against 91 of the Axis, of which only 34 Germans; abundance of artillery; domain of the sky; stocks within the army for ten days of autonomy.

At 7:15 am on 15 January Leese began the operation in a framework of absolute mastery of the air. The New Zealanders made their way to the fort with the two brigades of the 7th Arm. Div. on the wings: the 8th Armored about ten kilometers to the north, 4th Light Armored much further south, towards el-Faschia.

Rommel was expecting the resumption of the offensive and, for all he knew, the prospects looked quite dark. The balance of forces calculated by the information service gave little hope ⁽⁷³⁾:

tanks:	93 Axis against 650 British
armored cars:	33 Axis against 200 British
field pieces:	170 Axis against 360 British
pieces A/T.	177 Axis against 200 British
Aircraft:	150 approximately Axis against British 4-500

Of the 93 wagons of the Axis just 36 were Germans, the only ones able to fight against the *Sherman* and *Grant*. But here we need a clarification. Citing the availability of 36 Pzkw, Rommel alludes to those of the 15th *Panzer*. Unfortunately, the removal of the 21st *Panzer* turned out a wrong initiative. Not so much for the considerations that the suggested, as for the way of implementation. Of the four commands

Schizzo n. 27

[illegible]

involved, two were precipitous (Comando Supremo and ACIT), one against (Superlibia), one logical (OKW). Let's review the sequence.

Rommel warmly supported the proposal, perhaps with the intention to force the issue in Rome on the timing of the retreat, however mistaken to appreciate the true extent of such a reduction in forces; For its part, the Comando Supremo, while nurturing a deep distrust on the intentions of Rommel, welcomed the idea without careful examination and on behalf of Mussolini ordered the immediate movement of large units to Sfax; Rommel, just received the telegram (evening of the 12th), issued at once the executive order, so that the morning of the 13th the 21st *Panzer* was already moving. The more careful and cautious was certainly the OKW: known the decision, suggested that the 21st leave the main armament on the Buerat line to benefit the 15th *Panzer*, who have extra personnel. "*Thus - He explained to the Supreme Commander Maj. Von Plewe commissioned by OKW - you would avoid weakening too much the front of Buerat*". But when the Comando Supremo passed the arrangement, that is to say on the evening of the 13th ⁽⁷⁴⁾, the division was already in Bani Walid and receive the order of the ACIT only the 14th in Tarhuna. That's why the 34 tanks, the 88 pieces, two field batteries and an anti-aircraft left to Tarhuna of the 21st *Panzer* were missed by the 15th when the 30th Corp advanced against the British positions of Buerat.

The attack Leese ruled with considerable superiority. The 8th Arm. Bd. collided with the *Centauro* group, the 2nd New Zealand against the 15th *Panzer*, the 4th Light Arm. Bd. against the veil consisting of German Recon groups. The resistance of the Axis troops against a push indeed not too violent was valid and effective, so much so that by Leese briefly suspend the action, to take it up with more systematic in the afternoon. At the end of the day the *Centauro* group and the 15th *Panzer* had to fall back on *wadi Zemzem* and Recon. groups to the north-west of el-Faschia.

According to the ACIT Command, the 8th Army was attacking with two infantry Divisions (the 51st *Highlanders* and the 2nd New Zealand), three armored divisions (the 1st with two armored brigades and one motorized, the 7th of similar constitution, and the 10th with a armored brigade and a motorized), a French brigade and one Greek. In the process of arriving, the British 50th Division and 4th Indian. Always in the opinion of the ACIT, the action on the right side had a preliminary nature; in the night of the 16th it would develop the decisive battle on all fronts. What persuaded, at 20:00 Rommel ordered the general retreat on the line of Homs, under the protection of the mechanized rear guard - of the 90th Light and the *Luftwaffe* brigade, the 15th *Panzer*, the *Centauro* battle group and the 33rd and 580th Recon. Bns. - remained more or less at the first intermediate line.

When, at 22:30, the 51st *Highlanders* in turn left the bases of departure, it met only minefields just watched and soon the 8th Army Command became convinced that Italian-German Army

was leaving. The next morning, Montgomery decided to abandon the precautions prescribed to the divisions in the first row - cautiously suggested by the supposed two hundred anti-tank guns and twenty-five pieces of 88 the ACIT - and urged faster progress. The harsher action took place in the afternoon south of Sedada, between the 15th Panzer and the *Centauro* group on one side and the New Zealanders with the 8th Armored Brigade on the other. In this fight, the *Centauro* group (Gen. Costa), suffered considerable losses and found itself in serious embarrassment for lack of fuel: about 180 people dead, wounded and missing; 14 tanks destroyed or immobilized and 12 abandoned because lack of fuel; two field pieces and seven anti-tank guns destroyed.

Rommel saw worsening the threat of mass enveloping of Leese. At noon on the 17th, just as the *Centauro* group gathered northwest of Bani Walid and the English 239th Wing was moving on the new landing strip in the southeast of Sedada, it received Gen. Giglioli. The restlessness of Field Marshal was visible: the 90th Light signaled the pressure of the 51st *Highlanders* in Tauorga, the Recon. Bns. were pursued by the 4th Arm. Bd. slightly south of Bani Walid, everywhere he complained shortage of fuel. In such conditions any counter-offensive act became impossible, so do not just have to continue the retreat of Tarhuna-Homs. Given, however, the huge British superiority, even on new positions not considered feasible that a break of a few days. In essence, already the next day a third of the infantry had to leave the sector to move to Tripoli and Homs. Immediately after it was the turn of the second third, which, however, could be held in Homs on condition that the XXI Corp immediately receive 360 heavy trucks.

The tender spots, in final analysis, were three: the excessive gap forces, the shortage of vehicles and fuel shortage. Therefore Rommel let out dire predictions: likely to see the British already in Tripoli on the 20th and serious doubts of being able to bring to Mareth the bulk of the Italian infantry. Ahead of similar prediction, Giglioli then asked if a resistance to the bitter end on the Homs- Tarhuna line could allow much needed gain of time, but according to Rommel similar operational choice would lead to the annihilation of the ACIT.

Bastico was speechless when Giglioli told him the meeting. He turned to the Comando Supremo harshly denouncing the seriousness of the situation depended on a whole series of negative factors - most of which are implicitly to be charged to the same Rommel - that the non-arrival of any reinforcement, abandonment of lines el-Agheila and Buerat almost without fighting, the hasty departure of the 21st *Panzer* and German propaganda from time indicating the retreat into Tunisia as the healthy touches for all the troubles of the circumstances. These elements, Bastico wrote, "*have created, especially in the junior officers & now also in troops, a particularly & deleterious*

state of mind, that all efforts are no longer able to fight." However, he intended to find the maximum number of vehicles, knowing that weigh heavily on supplies and the evacuation of the logistical apparatus.

Cavallero said, trying to defuse. After all, it was not possible that he could remain in Homs- Tarhuna more than expected, especially as there were in Tarhuna tanks and artillery left by the 21st *Panzer*, and the fuel was coming⁽⁷⁵⁾. We add that the same Rommel, who arrived in Tarhuna, recognized the "*extraordinarily good*" chance defensive line, thanks to the presence of a sandy soil and difficult feasibility for an attack from the south and southeast.

The step back was completed on the morning of 18 January, when a great part of the XXI Corp of Navaririi were already moving towards the eastern city of Tripoli: a third of *Trieste* and *La Spezia* and various units.

In the area of Homs, then, was deployed the XXI Corp - with the *Pistoia*, the *Trieste* and *La Spezia* and the 90th Light in reserve. In the stretch in front of Tarhuna they prepared mobile units: German Recon. Bns., the 15th *Panzer* with the *Luftwaffe* Brigade, the *Giovani Fascisti* with the *Centauro* group and finally the 164th Light.

To the west he lays the long side defensive, facing south, set up by the troops retrieved from Fezzan.

The eviction of Fezzan had just ended (sketch n. 28). Few losses, in some sensitive locations defections of Libyans. At the dawn of the 5th began the retreat of the garrisons of Uau el-Chebir, Sebha, Brach and Umm el-Abid and the first group of Hon. On the 6th surrendered the garrison of El Gatrún. On the morning of the 7th took the road the small garrison of Murzuk; first reached by a French plane, then by motorized elements, the little camel column surrendered too. The garrison of Gath, however, failed to find the necessary number of camels and was forced to remain in place; only good part of it could be cleared later to Tripoli by air⁽⁷⁶⁾.

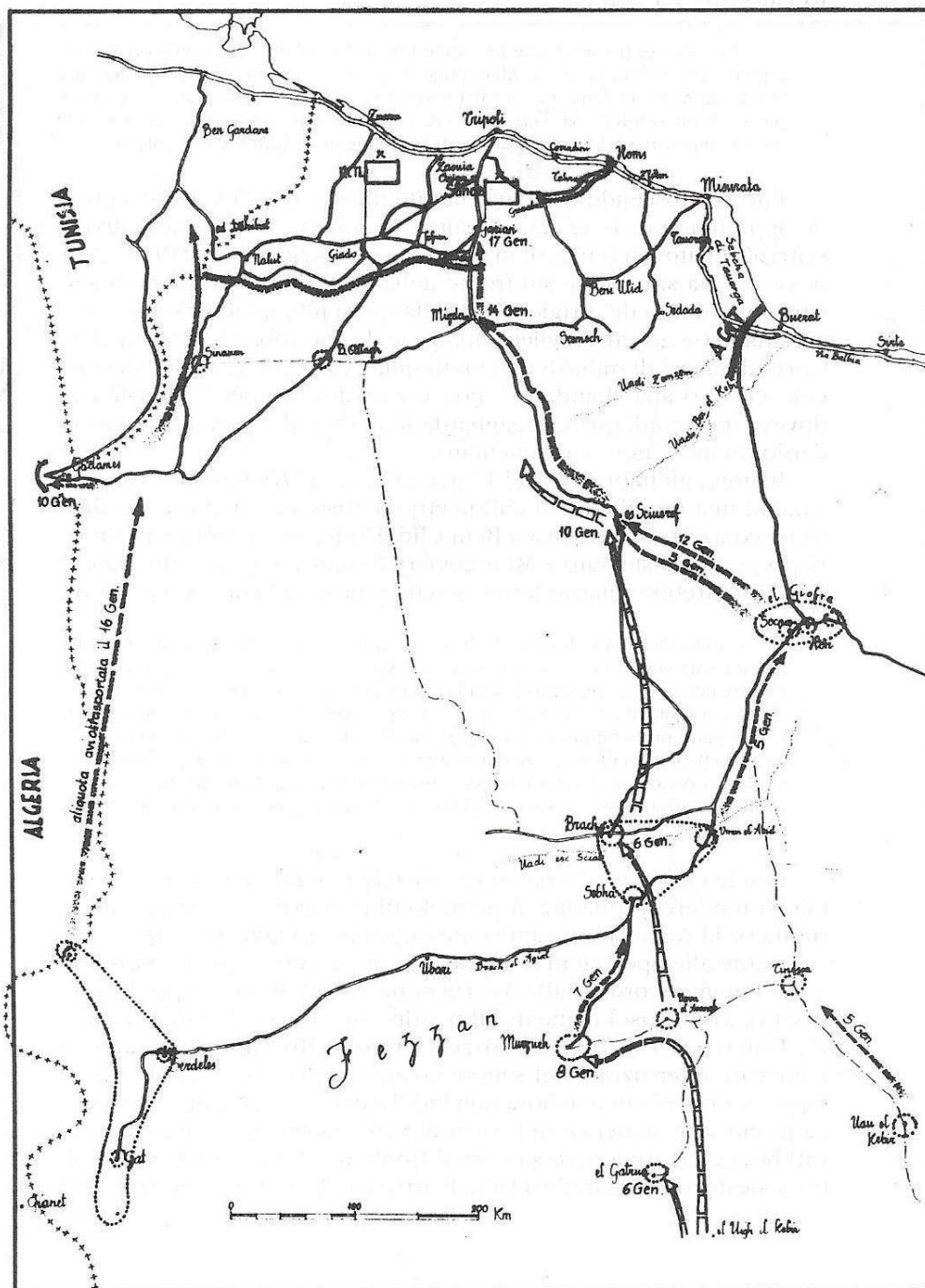
January 10 French elements attacked esc-Sciueraf, held by a Libyan unit and, after a short bombardment, occupied the town, without being able to harm the retreat of the bulk of the garrison of Hon, which took place on the 12th. On balance facts can be said that the whole of the movements was not substantially disturbed by the enemy, thanks to the work of the Saharan aviation, which, immediately moved to Hon and from Sebha to the field of Assabaa (Garian), never stopped the its observation missions and strafing against origins from the south and from *wadis* Zemzem.

As of the 18th the troops of Fezzan were collected in the Garian-Jefren area, with the projecting part of Mizdâ⁽⁷⁷⁾. Further west,

The evacuations of Fezzan

Schizzo n. 28

LO SGOMBERO DEL FEZZAN
(5-17 gennaio)



of the Jefren the border, the line was fortified essentially Libyan units, with mobile units pushed south. The garrison of Ghadames was still standing, isolated (sketch n. 29).

Understandably, Gen. Leclerc sent to London a victorious and proud statement:

"In less than three weeks, the French troops fighters have conquered the whole territory of Fezzan. The conclusion of this campaign there are already more than 700 prisoners, 40 guns, 40 assault tanks, an important number of weapons and vehicles captured by French and three flags, which were added to the four that adorn the star of honor of the Senegalese tirailleurs regiment."

While acknowledging the due credit to the company of Leclerc, it is appropriate to point out that in fact the more that conquered Fezzan was occupied by the French, in relation to the Italian withdrawal connected with the situation on the front of Tripoli. Nothing to watch on the number of prisoners (almost all Libyans) and captured pieces (generally antiquated artillery abandon due to lack of transport means); exaggerated the amount of weapons and vehicles. As for the "flags", not existing in the Libyan Sahara, it must have some minor unit pennant of Libyan flag or non regulated pennant.

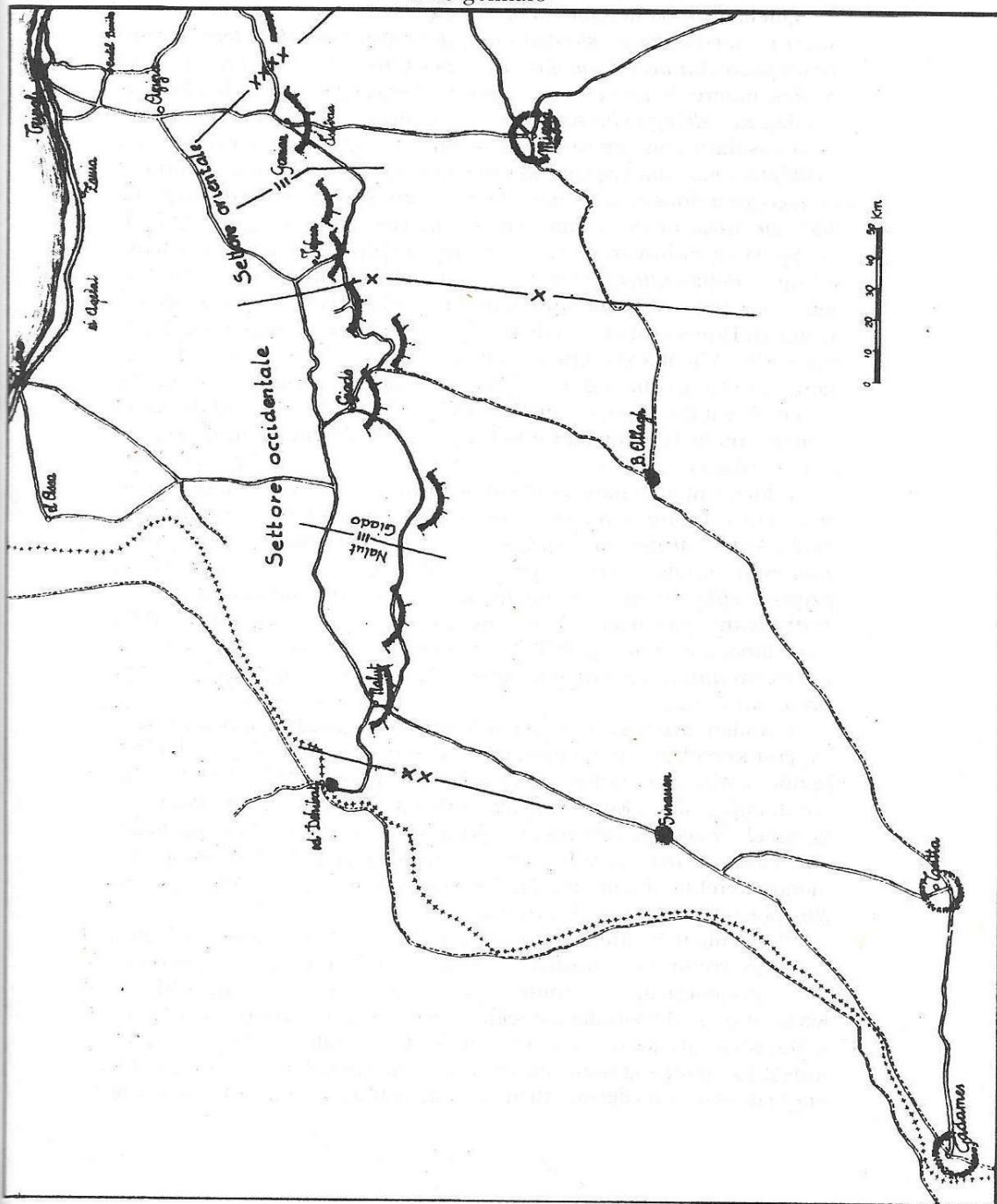
Meanwhile, at dusk on Jan. 17, the 51st *Highlanders* had arrived at about fifteen kilometers from Misrata, while the 7th Armored Division stood at Bani Walid. The offensive was proceeding at a rather stunted pace and Montgomery quivered, well warning that Rommel would remain firm until he was seriously threatened:

"(...) I felt, for the first time since he had assumed command of the 8th Army, a real anxiety. If you did not reach Tripoli - wrote later - within the limit of ten days imposed upon the logistical situation, I could find myself faced with the necessity of a difficult decision: I could be forced to stop the advance and likely to fall back on Buerat and even further to maintain supplies of the 8th Army. I decided then to pick up the pace of operations and do battle so at night as during the day in order to break through the position Homs- Tarhuna and reach my goal" ⁽⁷⁸⁾.

That circumstances - known to him in every detail - were such as to make 'likely' the danger to fall back on Buerat, or even on el Agheila, is certainly exaggerated; However, a stroke of accelerator operations are required with evidence. That same evening, Montgomery ordered the 51st *Highlanders* and the 30th Corp to push forward resolutely. On the morning of the 18th the 22nd Arm. Bd. occupied Bir Dufan and the 132nd Scottish Brigade entered Misrata. As the many breaks in the coastal sector and the difficulty of the terrain represented a considerable obstacle, now the machine was gaining momentum and in the course of 19 January the British advanced elements appeared all along the front from Homs to Tarhuna and beyond. This "addition" resulted in the arrival of the 4th Light Arm. Bd. at Bir

Schizzo n. 29

LO SCHIERAMENTO DELLE TRUPPE DEL SAHARA E
DELLA TRIPOLITANIA
il 18 gennaio



es-Sueda. The *Stuka* intervened on it and signaled to ACIT Command "*a motorized column moving toward Garian*". The communication, together with captured documents of a British officer, led to believe an imminent massive attack from Garian and Tarhuna on Tripoli.

That morning Rommel wrote to his wife: "*We are now in a rather hilly terrain, where we hope to stop a little. But there is no way to compensate for the gap of power (...)*." Apart from a certain discontent "*Berndt returned [from Germany]. Kesselring has supplanted in favor of the Führer*" ⁽⁷⁹⁾ and the disconsolate comment that the worst was yet to come, he evidently harbored a reasonable hope that the enemy was not already close. The news that "*the British were about to pounce on Garian with an entire armored division*" ⁽⁸⁰⁾ upset him. He moved to the south-west of Tarhuna everything he had at hand - brigade of the *Luftwaffe* and Recon Bns. - in reinforcing the 164th Light, to oppose at least one aperture to the attack and, as far as the front of Homs and to Tarhuna quickly calmed down, he ordered that the XXI Corp fell back immediately on Tripoli with the 90th Light in rearguard to Homs; the XX, the *Giovani Fascisti* and *Centauro*, moved to Zauia (west of Tripoli); the DAK went south of Castel Benito with the 164th Light and the Brigade of the *Luftwaffe* in the rear at Tarhuna.

It is easy to imagine the reaction provoked at the Comando Superiore Libya similar order. Bastico immediately sought to block the ACIT: "*The threat to bypass the right wing of the army – he telegraphed - is not in my opinion so imminent to grave feeling to you. Please think carefully about orders given by you that threaten to transform the withdraw underway in to a disaster. I would be grateful for news*" ⁽⁸¹⁾. At the same time urged Cavallero: "*Please intervene with all your authority with Marshal Rommel to avoid what is represented*" ⁽⁸²⁾.

Cavallero had already planned a brief inspection tour in Africa, with Kesselring, both far from supposing the sharp turn of operations in Tripoli. Just the morning of the 19th, in an exchange of impressions, Kesselring had reported that Hitler was expected of Rommel "*increased fighting activity,*" and Cavallero had replied that Bastico "*involuntarily makes a depressing propaganda,*" while he had to go "*every day see the troops and King speaks to lift the spirits*" ⁽⁸³⁾.

The 20th, at 09:30 he landed in Tunis and had a long talk with von Arnim. Then they went to Castel Benito, where the Anglo-American aviation - known the photographic survey that most of the Axis air units there were concentrated (nearly two hundred aircraft) - it had raged on the night of the 18th with thirteen Flying Fortresses and night of the 19th with a repeat by the bombers. Finally they went to the village Bianchi, tactical headquarters of the Comando Superiore

Libya. At 14:00, just arrived, Cavallero meet preliminary with Giglioli and Mancinelli. The latter asked for an opinion, stated that no longer seemed possible to recover and force the enemy to a halt: to think that the retrograde movement now assume the desired frequency was utopian; at most it could be a slightly delay.

At 15:30, this Kesselring, began the report which had been summoned Bastico, Gen. Bernasconi 5th Air Fleet commander, Adm. Giartosio commander of the Royal Marina in Libya, and the commanders of arms. There was little to say and in fact Cavallero, exposed the bitter surprise of a state of affairs not imagined until the day before, he concluded - probably without much conviction - with an invitation to explain to the troops still maneuvering underway "*will take us into a position to obtain the final victory*" ⁽⁸⁴⁾.

Shortly afterwards Rommel showed. The tension that animated him was evident. He explained that his sudden decision came from what was observed in the morning of the 19th, during a visit to the XX Corp Command. The effort enemy in place in the field of Tarhuna resulted conducted by two divisions, the New Zealand and the 7th Armored, and aimed to Zauia with the purpose of cutting off the entire ACIT. Cavallero was not at all convinced of the validity of the reasons given, especially since Bernasconi and Seidemann, the *Fliegerführer Afrika*, had rated present south-east of Garian an armored brigade and an arduous journey, and with a potential threat and not imminent. Consequently handed Rommel order prepared after talks with Giglioli and Mancinelli:

“1. The Duce has found that the order you gave last night for the continuation of the withdraw towards west is at odds with the directives issued by him & he approves the telegram 01/1071 directed to you by Marshal Bastico.

2. The situation which was known last night, and which is based on assessments of today does not justify, in the opinion of the Duce, the measure adopted, much less justify the immediate enforcement. The enemy does not impose a prolonged stay; before reaching the front of Tripoli, it means giving to perform the task which is entrusted to the ACIT. This task is that the Duce will set in its directives in the order of 1 January. Both of these documents will have been communicated by Marshal Bastico.

3. To hasten the movement towards Tunisia will undermine the military situation in that area, which is not presently able to receive these forces, while not yet ready defensive positions that the army should occupy.

4. The Duce is therefore considered that the rushing movements as you do, the withdrawal will be converted into a route without remedy.

5. Accordingly, the Duce gave me the assignment to report that calls you to observe the guidelines given by him”⁽⁸⁵⁾.

Now, we must recognize that the eviction was the case of the *gebeliche* positions (Homs- Tarhuna) and departure for Tunisia of the 21st *Panzer* automatically entailed the impossibility of imposing a prolonged delay to the British advance before

the line of Mareth. The edge of the *gebelico* plateau, in fact, was the last position of Tripoli that offers tactical handholds suitable for some defense. Further west the Gefara became easy and viable in every sense, with the exception of the coastal strip, the extensive *sebche*.

Gebelico plateau is connected in a sufficiently harmonious, the entrenched camp in Tripoli. It consisted of a remarkable complex of permanent works, prepared in time of peace. Built according to the criteria of doctrinal time, like those of the rest of French Mareth, the works could handle infantry attacks, the maximum supported by meager share of tanks. Moreover, the presence of thick olive groves in many areas strongly limited field of view and firing of weapons within range tense, especially in Homs-Cussabat. Absolutely not provided the opportunity to use a mass of large armored units. Another weakness was the strategic hypothesis: conceived in terms of a possible offensive by Tunisia, the system had a east side extremely weak and, moreover, is not complete, since, with the collapse of France in 1940 and with the emergence of a war only on the distant Egyptian border, the work had been suspended and various works even unarmed to recover weapons of various kinds, especially anti-tank. Because the permanent system does not extend to the south west, beyond Castel Benito, became easy to circumvent accessible through area of Gefara at the feature of Azizia. In such conditions, as stated by Bastico, it was to exclude the defense of Tripoli - also studied and examined in detail the executive - as his unit would remain surrounded and inevitably, sooner or later, have to yield to exhaustion.

All this was known to Rommel and of course the question immediately assumed a tone quite lively. During it the commander of the ACIT showed openly not give much credence to the promises of flow of fuel and vehicles for the infantry, nor trust to a concrete contribution of aviation. In this regard, the same Cavallero had to admit with Mussolini the paucity of hope: the 5th Air Fleet had only 32 Mk 202 fighters and 20 assault aircraft Mk 200 efficient, the German Air Force 55 fighters and 12 *Stuka*, almost everyone now in the Tunisian fields of Ben Gardane and Medenine.

The next morning Cavallero received a surprise. The final part of the report of the ACIT was devoted to Comando Supremo and the Comando Superiore of Libya:

“With reference to the directives of the Comando Supremo today give me the orders of Mussolini, please determine with clarity and care when defending to the bitter end in the south-east and east of Tripoli must take the risk of heavy losses, respectively, or the annihilation of our forces, undoubtedly connected, or if held in an order for the mass of the Italian-German army position of Mareth still time and follow-up [?] very efficiently, giving up the fight to the bitter end. Given the strength of the British 8th Army and the possibility

Withdrawing to the west of Tripoli on one street (the off-road terrain is most impractical), it is possible only one of the two solutions; an intermediate solution is excluded"⁽⁸⁶⁾.

The communication was deliberately brutal and Cavallero, who believed that he had expressed "*with much form but also with great energy*" - as reported to Mussolini -in reference to the directives of the Duce, was puzzled. Kesselring went to and found Rommel, so their clarifying that it was meant in the day took place immediately.

The summary submitted to Mussolini not think that the preamble of Cavallero was very convincing:

"(...) I told Rommel that after talks yesterday I asked instructions from Rome and in the afternoon I was hoping to be able to communicate; that on my behalf, as opinion, I thought it could not even put the sharp alternative he proposed, because none of the terms of it, that annihilation of the army or acceleration of the maneuver, had been contemplated in the orders of the Duce. I added that to my mind the orders of the Duce could not be a change, that is, they prescribe not to expose the army to annihilation, and saving time as possible, these terms within which the task of the ACIT should be acquitted (...)".

All this left things as they were. He did not answer the equity question of Rommel and not dissolve the antithetic, in those circumstances, the terms of the problem. However, presenting the issue as not "*start to speed up the operation,*" but as a "*mode only intended to make it possible to the ACIT to hold the enemy even longer with all its motorized elements,*" Cavallero authorized further and immediate withdrawing steps of two-thirds of non-mobile infantry to *Medenine*, namely the line of Mareth, and the withdrawal from the positions of Homs and Tarhuna the third echelon. According to that report, Rommel showed understanding that the instructions given him not the result of a selfish interest in Italian, but by necessity for the operation intended to "*avoid compromising the tide of battle in the arena of Tunisia.*" However, Kesselring took leave commented:

"(...) we have to deal with the mutability of the spirit of Rommel, who can always, in front of a word of his overvalued, changing attitudes and decisions"⁽⁸⁷⁾.

Indeed, the observation does not seem very objective it centered: while it may be an acceptable critique of Rommel tendency to overestimate the information in the sense of interpreting them according to his preconceptions, it seems difficult to move precisely to those who change all or the operating design due to new circumstances deemed dangerous.

In the final conversation, in private, between Kesselring and Cavallero he had matured a problem that has long lay on the carpet, between hesitation and reticence. It was time, the situation since

frankly it was becoming dangerously unsustainable. It is worth noting that, even in this, who provoked the conclusion was Rommel. In fact, he had told Kesselring of feeling bad physically and psychologically and feel the need of a long rest at the end of the retreat to Mareth. All the nodes automatically disbanded and the proposals that Gen. Magli came from Cavallero committed to urgently submit to Mussolini regarding the following: control of the Italian army, the ACIT, already entrusted to Gen. Messe; chief of the G.S., Gen. Mancinelli; liaison officer with the German 5th army, Colonel. Bayerlein, current chief of the G.S. of the ACIT; Headquarters of the Army at Sfax; the General Staff for the said Command was supplied largely by the Comando Superiore Libya, which would obviously be dissolved.

While noting an improvement in the progression towards the west, Montgomery was not very satisfied and known movement of the brigade of the *Luftwaffe* from Homs to Tarhuna, he decided to change the gravitational stress. The rest had estimated this case and deliberately kept at hand the 22nd Arm. Bd., Now in Zliten. On the 20th, therefore, began with the direction of Gen. Wimberley, commander of the 51st *Highlanders*, an "imperial rocket", a terrific primer for the poor initiative hitherto demonstrated. The same evening the tired division vigorously resumed the attack throwing the 90th Light to the village Corradini. The clash, led by five battalions, it was very hard and the Germans could narrowly disengage the remains of a battalion was surrounded. The evening of the 21st, despite the difficulties caused by the skilful destruction and demolition carried out by German pioneers, the *Highlanders* entered the town and 22nd Arm. Bd. carried on to the outskirts of Homs.

Inwards, at the dawn of the 21st the 7th Arm Div. was advanced in two columns. The 4th Light Arm. Bd. had luck found the ground clear, its armored cars infiltrated deeply until about twenty kilometers south of Azizia; instead the 8th Arm. Bd. was held north of Tarhuna by the 164th Light. The New Zealand, meanwhile, attacked Garian managing to overcome the delaying elements therein and continue to Azizia. That evening Cavallero and Bastico were convinced once more than the premature abandonment of the line Homs- Tarhuna in the night on 20th had favored enemy action. Just as Rommel persuaded the imminence of a turning to the west of Tarhuna, Montgomery took a decision absolutely opposite.

In the early hours of the 22nd arrived to Superlibia the response of the Duce to the question posed by Rommel. Plain common sense that characterized it could emerge even before, admittedly. He had to choose, Mussolini wrote, between the resistance in the south-east of Tripoli with the inevitable annihilation of the army and the renunciation of the struggle with the rescue of the bulk of the armor at Mareth. Well, view

the situation and considered that he had not resisted the Homs- Tarhuna line, offering best handles tactical, it became preferable to save the ACIT, possibly to fully. Rommel immediately received the go and Cavallero returning to Italy.

At the same time, Montgomery gave another accelerated. In the late morning of the 22nd the vanguard of the 51st *Highlanders* entered Castelverde and in the afternoon the 22nd Arm. Bd. by passed the Scots with much hardship, it is impossible to carry out due to the road breaks implemented by engineers Axis - and headed for Tripoli, leading with the *Valentines* of the I *Gordon*.

As a counter-attack of the 15th *Panzer* to arrest the British pressure between Azizia and Castel Benito, it was evident the next closing of the enemy pincer on Tripoli. Rommel, the 21st, had already ordered the starting above Zuara the non-motorized infantry; Now he saw the final phase. The line roughly running from the fortifications of the eastern outskirts of Tripoli to Castel Benito-Azizia-Jefren-Nalut-and Dehibat. The eastern front was held by the rearguard of the ACIT, the south from Tripoli Troops Command, who was trying to recover at least part of the detached elements located from Ghadames to Mizdâ.

On the afternoon of the 22nd, when the 4th Light Arm. Bd. occupied Castel Benito, Rommel ordered the withdrawal of the units remaining in the belt of Tripoli. At the dawn of the 23rd, shortly after the evacuation of the rearguard of the Axis, the enemy came into Tripoli with the 11th Hussars from the south and the 50th Tank from the east.

For the British, rightly, it was a great victory. Radio London, at 21:00 of January 23 announced:

"Tripoli is in our hands for the first time and will serve as a forward base for supplying the further march of the 8th Army (...). Our engineers are already at work this evening in the port to repair the damage and make it again usable (...). Now no part of Tunisia will be out of reach of light bombers and long rang fighters operating from Libyan bases or from French North Africa (...)"

And two days later Radio London, at 23:20, spread on dispatches from Libya, all agreed - with the support of confidences and comments of Italian prisoners - in stressing the abandonment of Italian troops by the German side. "*The rearguard actions from el-Agheila to Tripoli have been fought by Italian soldiers. But these rearguard had no other task than to protect the German retreat. The Italian rearguard had to fight with no food and no water,*" he said, among other things, Radio London. Clearly, the purpose of such propaganda claims, totally free, however, would be wrong to believe that any such idea was not really widespread among Italian troops, especially at the highest level. Do not forget that began to arrive rumors of tragedy of the ARMIR*.

*Italy's Army in Russia

Evacuating Tripoli, the Axis forces rallied initially in the coastal strip between Zauia, Agelat and Zuara. According to the orders of Rommel, the non-mobile troops moved in waves and stopped south of the Via Balbi, at major junctions, so as to block all origins from the *gebelico* arc across the plain of Gefara and protect against Attempts to break the only artery of retreat to Tunisia. The motorized troops, to which were added various Italian units mounted on vehicles for the occasion, took instead the rearguard function against forces coming from the east.

Ensured the maintenance of the two main pivots of the grid, the positions of Sorman-Zauia in the coastal strip and the crossroads of el-Uotia western edge of Gefara, the ACIT resumed moving westward January 24 (sketch n. 30). According to the now familiar form of Rommel, he assumed therefore staggering along the Balbia very strong, but in the course of the overall movement formations were even more diluted, greatly emphasizing the depth of the device. At this point, the non-motorized units, in successive swings and turns, they led directly to Mareth, where they began to settle down; those motorized movement also continued to Tunisia, while continuing in their job as rearguard.

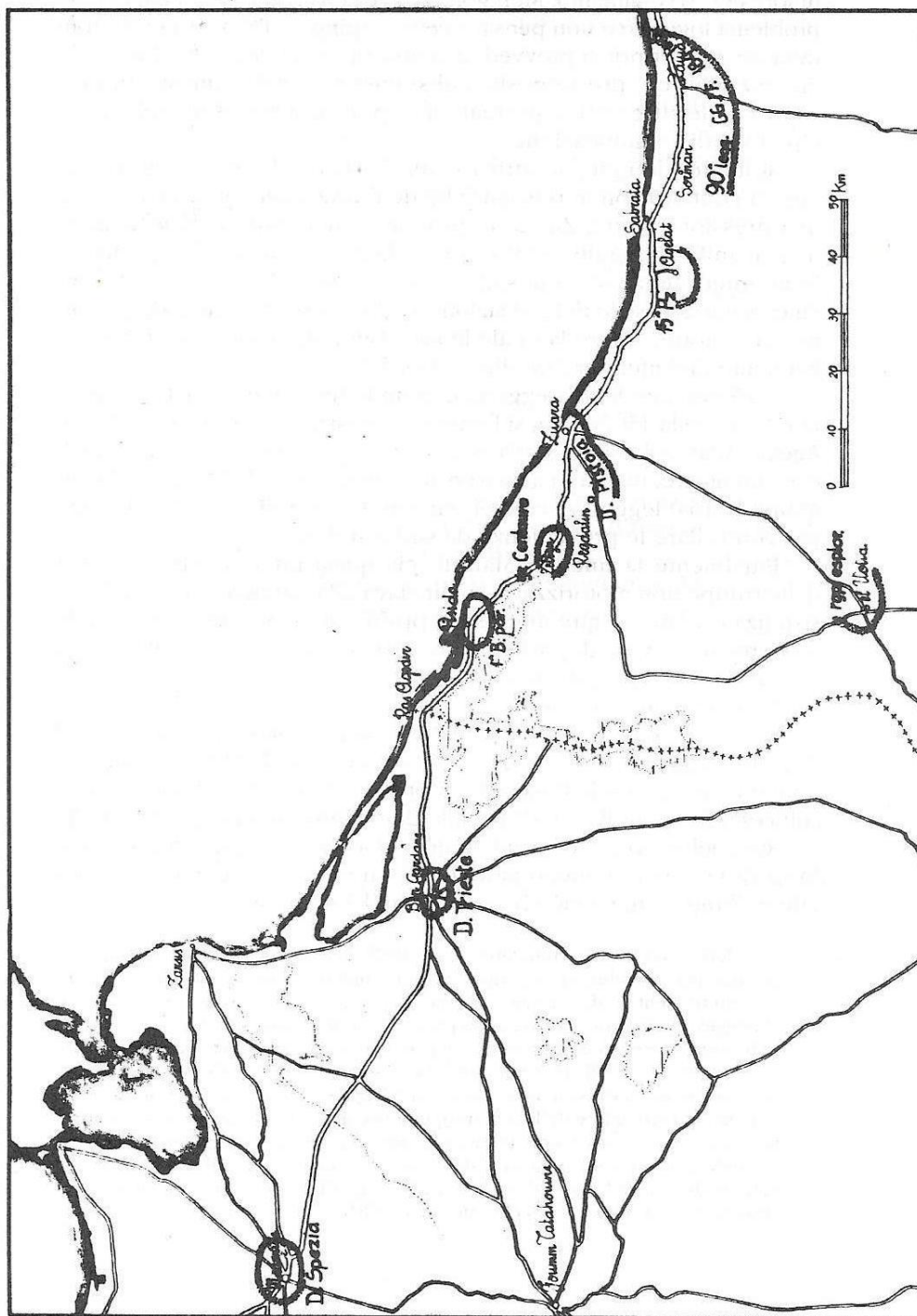
It should be noted that the phasing of forces both edited by Rommel also tended to avoid dangerous incursions by the *Long Range Desert Group*, in its usual disruptive activities. Frequently, during the retreat from El Agheila to Buerat, they were attempts to wreak havoc in the rear of the ACIT and to perform acts of sabotage able to shake the morale of the troops, to undermine the action of the commands and to stand in some so the operations of withdraw. Taken together, however, these raids were proved vain and the effects obtained were scarce and modest.

During the further retreat of the Axis from Tripoli, the British patrols is proposed objectives more ambitious: to reach the headquarters of the Italian Command of rank higher in the area between Misurata and Castelverde, Capture the Generals, create crisis operating in the same Commands, possession of secret documents. Taking advantage of the favorable environmental conditions, the British saboteurs succeeded in infiltrating behind the ACIT, passing between the right wing of this and the oversight of Hon, and to get to the area south of the Via Balbi, at the height of Misrata, where the crevices of the terrain and the coverage allowed easy cover. In this period all the actions failed for diligent supervision and the prompt reaction of the elements responsible for the protection of the headquarters. So, in isolation or in small groups, the Raiders fell into our hands. Among them also their commander, Col. Sterling. The survivors had to renounce any other hope and only minimally managed to return to their lines.

The situation of the ACIT the morning of 24 January

Schizzo n. 30

LA SITUAZIONE DELL'ACIT IL MATTINO DEL 24 GENNAIO



British forces were proving reward and met the success achieved with the occupation of Tripoli, the ultimate goal of the offensive from El Alamein. Thus fell the worry and fear of the turning of the chase. Montgomery had to solve a massive logistical problem and no thoughts of pushing the 8th Army to the border without first steps to establish an adequate power base, with the prerequisite of the reconditioning of the port facilities of Tripoli and the restoration of the main roads.

He just, therefore, to entrust the 7th Arm. Div. the task of maintaining contact with the hindmost of Axis, exerting on them a pressure up to Zuara, near the border. This action is manifested also as slow and cautious as not to cause disturbance or interference whatsoever on our retreat, which however suffered from the constant carousel of Anglo-American aviation, active both day and night, against which the possibilities of reaction They were extremely limited, if not negligible

On January 25, the 90th Light, with a battalion of the 164th Light and one of the 15th *Panzer*, stood on the positions of Sorman-Sabratha-Agelat. Attacked the next day at Sorman, withdrew just a few kilometers, but managed to keep possession of Sabratha. At the same time the 164th Light concentrated in the area of Foum Tatahouine to control the approaches from the south and southeast.

Finally the Mareth line, already almost entirely occupied by the non-motorized troops, began to have a certain size and to take on a specific profile. Remained unobstructed the only areas envisaged for the relocation of units, the maximum armor, still to withdraw. Of course it was necessitated some structural changes. On January 25, the military command of the Libyan Sahara was transformed into Command Saharan grouping and Military Command of Tripoli, losing the functions of territorial control, it remained with only operational tasks and passed to the direct employment of the ACIT.

Rommel was indeed dejected. It was strong, but the wear and tear of the spirit was equal to the moral. The letter of 25 January to the wife is enlightening about what was passing in his mind:

"Yesterday everything went as planned. I just can not tell you how heavy for me to suffer this retreat and all that comes with it. Day and night are tormented by the thought that the events can really change for the worse here, in Africa. I'm so depressed apply myself with difficulty to my work. It may be that someone else sees brighter in the situation and be able to act accordingly. K. [= Kesselring], for example, is full of optimism. Perhaps he sees in me because of a no longer stop the army. It can not have any idea of the true value of my troops, and even Italians; not the disproportion of forces increasingly seriously weighed against us because of the excellent motorization of the enemy, his access to tanks and armored cars and the favorable situation of his supplies. Anxiously waiting to see what will happen"⁽⁸⁸⁾.

Also the 26th, while moving the headquarters of the ACIT to Ben Gardane, Rommel was let go in sad considerations. The abandonment of the beautiful Cyrenaica first and Tripolitania now saddened him, thinking of the hard work and great dedication with which the Italian farmers had managed to rip whole wounds to the desolation of the desert. Where once he lays a barren and broken ground, just enough for the cattle of the Arabs, where irrigation systems still existing Roman were covered up, where the cultivation of wheat was unknown, had intervened the incredible thrust of the Italian colonization. Its splendor could just imagine under piles of rubble left by the war. And seeing the railway line under construction from Tunis to the Libyan border, calculated bitterly the huge mistake made by Italy to not build a railway line along the Libyan coast. *"If we could - he thought - to keep the front at Sirte for another three months, the railway from Tunis to Sirte would be completed"* ⁽⁸⁹⁾.

Meanwhile had come through Bastico, the communication of the Comando Supremo, according to which, the command of the new Italian 1st Army would be taken by Gen. Messe. These had been received by Cavallero in the afternoon of the 24th and made aware of the situation and conclusions. The Comando Supremo wanted the XXX Corp in Tunisia passed to the employment of the Italian army, but according to what Kesselring did not reconcile with the difference between the strategic areas of Mareth and Gafsa. The first clothed in clear defensive function against forces coming from the south; the second, instead, offensive and directed westward. Messe then had to take care of the southern front and von Arnim of the West. Both report directly to the Comando Supremo and with a single Intendenza.

The idea was that Rommel left the ACIT once deployed troops to the positions of Mareth. Meanwhile in Gen. De Stefanis, with Mancinelli, was to be the new commander of the army, divided into Tactical Command and Defensive Command, to facilitate the transfer of responsibilities and facilitate the settling of Messe. The definition of the date for the handover was left to Rommel, whose application for a license for health reasons was accepted by the OKW. Now that the bulk of the army was in Tunisia, Rommel represented an opportunity for a prompt conclusion:

"After the experiences made during the retreat - He wrote in his notes - I had little desire to continue to play the part of the scapegoat for a bunch of incompetent and asked the Comando Supremo to send Gen. Messe to Africa as soon as possible so he can settle into his new command" ⁽⁹⁰⁾.

Bastico also warmly supported the rapid arrival of Messe from Rome and was set to take place on January 31.

The evening of the 26th Cavallero sent two very urgent telegrams. The first was for Bastico: given the situation in Tunisia, it was essential

that, in the abandonment of the last of Tripolitania and the Tunisian border, Rommel impose some setback to the enemy, attacking its vanguard on wherever possible. "*This conduct by *hinhaltendes Gefecht* (fighting retardant) - concluded the message-is achievable if Commander of the armored army firmly wants it. This is the order of the Duce*" ⁽⁹¹⁾.

The second telegram, compiled in agreement with Kesselring, Rommel was for and defined the new duties: outer defense of southern Tunisia at the Mareth positions, ensuring the protection of the western flank between Djebel ksour and Chott Djerid. The Comando Supremo was placing the completion of the divisions of the army, sending the *Livorno* Inf. Div. and the assignment of the *Centauro* Arm. Div., but it took time and for this retreat had to be slowed down. Meanwhile, just in case, in southern Tunisia it was set up a reserve of the theater in the hands of the Comando Supremo. Limited to the sector between the ACIT and the 5th armored army: the 34th parallel (north of Gabes).

On January 27, the remaining forces in rearguard continued, virtually undisturbed, the planned withdrawal in stages. The 90th Light is brought to Zuara with orders to maintain possession until the following day the final outflow of the troops of the Sahara and of Tripoli.

The German 3rd and 33rd Recon. Bns. headed to one to Fom Tatahouine and one to Ben Gardane, while to the north-west of the 164th Light, stop at Fom Tatahouine, they went to the line units from Nalut to ensure possession of the passes required to move to the south-east of Ksar el Hallouf. The general location remained almost unchanged on 28 and 29 January. The brigade of the *Luftwaffe* had to ensure the monitoring of Pisida up to three days after the entry into Tunisia of the last elements of the 90th Light.

Simultaneously with the withdraw of the ACIT, also it occurred the gradual retreat of the Sahara and grouping of troops of Tripoli. Based on the orders issued by the Comando Superiore and in relation to the task of providing security of the southern flank of the ACIT, they had gathered and lined up along the *gebelico* arc, between Nalut and Garian, with detachments projected southward. Mizdâ was evacuated on the afternoon of the 22nd, after having successfully repelled an attack on the previous day by the French group D. The night on the 23rd the Sahara grouping, on the orders of Rommel, withdrew towards Jefren. The next day a small French tactical group D together with elements of the British 4th Armored Brigade Light made contact with the lines of the Axis at Garian. Given that the ACIT had already taken to the area between Zauia and Zuara, all units of the *gebelico* defensive side began the gradual withdrawal and moved to Tunisia, in the new deployment zone between Ksar el Hallouf and the Chott Djerid. A transfer laborious and complex, which presented enormous practical difficulties.

all Libyan troops were dismissed. On February 3, the last elements left Tripolitania.

At zero hour on January 31 Bastico ceded control of all Italian forces located in southern Tunisia to Rommel and at the same time the Comando Superiore Forze Armate of Libya ceased to function: now the passage of troops across the border could be considered completed ⁽⁹²⁾.

The biggest change was in the air for a couple of months, but it took place suddenly and caught everyone, perhaps even Ciano, surprising for its suddenness. On January 30, Cavallero was dismissed from the post of Chief of Staff General. The Gen. Ambrosio took over, who left the post of Chief of the G.S. of the Army to Gen Rosi. Instead of the latter, commander of the 6th Army in Sicily, it passed to Gen. Roat, which, in turn, yielded the 2nd Army in Croatia to Gen. Robotti.

The loss of Tripolitania, and that the abandonment of the entire Libya, contributed to choice of Mussolini. Dissatisfaction with the disastrous turn taken by the war -the Duce, while attribute to whether the great and crucial strategic decisions, was ready to wash his hands of the failures, which flowed quietly on 'technical' - met the awareness that they must indicate an accountable to the public. But it must also say that the criticism of Cavallero were extremely harsh and widespread. We will return to it.

3. CONSIDERATIONS ON RETREAT.

It is not easy to summarize in retrospect the entire retreat from Egypt to Tunisia, although it was a continuous retreat, characterized by more high-level discussions than by fighting. But it seems reasonable to divide the operational period into two parts: the dropping of the pressure of the 8th Army on the battlefield of El Alamein and the maneuver from the Libyan-Egyptian border to the positions of Mareth.

The first time was dramatic. The withdrawal order, issued in the afternoon of November 4, Rommel, was determined not to be a free decision, but by the need to leave as soon as the terrain of the struggle to recover at least part of the ACIT. The idea to deploy the troops on the line of Fuka, which theoretically offered some pretext, did not hold before the reality of a disastrous collapse, the loss of each link, an urge enemy, a relentless spread of the *Royal Air Force*.

In the night of 5 November, walking with Mancinelli on the landing strip of Fuka, Rommel manifested the tumult of feelings that stirred in his soul. He showed exacerbation at the orders of Hitler and Mussolini who had delayed too long

troops that did not even know what he could recover, worried about the further unfolding of the campaign given the unbridgeable forces gap, but decided to play the game again despite the poverty of the means available. "*They were bitter thoughts* - he later recalled - *that night of defeat.*"

But we also know that he formulated an operational assessment coldly clear and devoid of uncertainties. In the circumstances of the moment, without any hope of victory in Russia, with the uncertainty of the Anglo-American convoy of exceptional size reported in Gibraltar, with the powerful 8th Army marching towards Libya, the final success in Europe it seemed doubtful and the defeat in Africa safe. In his eyes there was, therefore, one possible course of action: to bring back the army avoiding them other losses and transfer it as soon as possible to Europe. The British had shown the way forward when the game is lost: save soldiers abandoning, if necessary, tanks, artillery and vehicles.

Needless debating whether by Rommel was dictated by pure conception of pessimism, because even he did not know the magnitude of the forces on which he could count, and the reinforcements that he would have benefited from Italy and Germany, or dispassionate examination of the situation carried out based on the awareness of the extent of the defeat and the sad experience about the limited reliance of the promises of aid of the Comando Supremo, OBS and OKW. The purpose of transferring the army into Tunisia, escaping all attempts at holding the opponent, Rommel will be unshakable.

All other players thought otherwise. But all of them were far away from the Egyptian theater, all downplayed the unfortunate outcome of the battle. With the arrival of more and more precise information it became clear that a stop before the border could only be donated by the enemy. The association has had absolute need to put a bit of space between himself and the 8th Army.

The question of resistance on the positions of Sollum-Halfaya-Sidi Omar formed the first episode of the long diatribe that accompany the entire retrograde motion. For the Comando Supremo were achievable adequate stand on the ridge Sollum-Halfaya because there existed a defensive organization already occupied with units of the *Pistoia* by Barbasetti, and the defilade of el-Agheila because presumably limit the ability of British progression. Resistance on the ridge of Sollum-Halfaya was allowed to set up a defensive position at el- Agheila with units of the *La Spezia* by Bastico. Of course, between the border and El Agheila the land was to be transferred systematically to rush and subsequent fighting. For the OKW and the OBS the dialog was more or less similar.

There were, therefore, two opposite orientations. The High Command intended to proceed with a real retarding maneuver to gain time for the arrangement of positions to the rear.

To Rommel deemed feasible only a maneuver of retreat to save the army. If it were a disquisition of a doctrinal, little sore. The trouble was that the application of either type of maneuver combat played a role very different: in the retarding it appeared as normal, the second appeared avoidable and still would affect the rearguard. Well, while Rommel intended to refuse battle so as not to suffer unnecessary losses, the 'others' believed that it was able to be able to accept without much damage.

Even in this regard, in the end, the conflict was not difficult to overcome: it took was a peremptory order and unequivocal. Unfortunately, the directives of the Comando Supremo presented almost to the last two serious negative characteristics. Too long they talked of defense to the bitter end rather than temporary defensive; withdrawing only in case of enemy attack and unsustainable without higher authorization, however, risking the annihilation of the army.

Not that Cavallero, first, was not aware of the incompatibility of such claims. Included definitely establish constraints unrealistic to recalcitrant commander of the ACIT, but somehow he felt compelled because he denied the credibility to the claims of powerlessness by Rommel (unfairly), he attributed the deliberate intention to act on his own (just), minimized the organic and logistical constraints complained to the army (arbitrarily) and underestimated the danger of a deadly embrace from the opponent. Significant comment made on November 21 to Gen. Geloso about the predictions on the possible further retreat to the west of El Agheila: "*You should not say to avoid mindset oriented to continuous withdraw!*"

Barbasetti apart, who was really just the man in charge of the Comando Supremo, two other people were directly involved in the events: Kesselring and Bastico. The first showed an even greater rigidity of views. Based on reports of the *Fliegerfuhrer Afrika* and especially on previous stunning victories of 1941, Rommel was convinced that, if he had really wanted to, would be able to jump suddenly on the British avant-garde, disperse and resume ... the initiative. In any case, he did not admit the constant refusal of the opportunities of struggle.

Bastico – who badly had endured the establishment of the delegation of the Comando Supremo, seeing in it the destruction of the unity of command and responsibility in the arena as well as the cause of interference and differences arising from structural change - remained spectator increasingly alarmed. When Cavallero told him the dissolution of Delease, in other words the return of the ACIT and all armed forces of Libya under his orders, and assigned him the task as the defense of Tripoli against the 8th Army, the top commander asked and obtained explicit assurance of substantial reinforcements of German tanks, artillery, vehicles, fuel and ammunition,

aircraft within a very short time. He also asked, but did not get it, the removal of Rommel who judged morally torn down and only oriented to run into Tunisia.

The reverse suffered at El Alamein had in fact added to the Anglo-American landing in French North Africa.

The opening of a new theater caught the Comando Supremo and the OKW almost by surprise. Despite reports of SIM since the beginning of October and the month-end appreciation of Supermarina, the imminence of an operation so imposing obviously had not found a lot of credit. Otherwise it becomes incomprehensible, inexcusable even before, that no concrete measure has followed the general admission of a twin emergency by Mussolini and Cavallero. The more openly incredulous an initiative allied in Morocco or in Algeria were the Germans; partly because they realized too late the serious failure of action against the convoys sailing the Atlantic, in part because they would never admit that the French, instead of resisting against an Anglo-American invasion, would eventually go along.

The Axis improvidence cost them dearly and provoked a much improvised intervention in Tunisia and initial strategic uncertainty also harmful.

At first, in fact, the establishment of the beachhead was considered, at least by the Italian, as *"the only way to save even Tripolitania"*⁽⁹³⁾. A couple of days later, Cavallero argued with von Rintelen convenience to give up Cyrenaica and gather strength in Tripolitania, leveraging the best chance of supply offered by Tunisia. Tripoli, he asserted, was of crucial importance because the barricade themselves in the small Tunisian space would bring in short order surrender. A week later the question was reversed: *"However, the main problem is now Tunis. If we lose Libya we still act. If we lose Tunisia no longer possible to do"*⁽⁹⁴⁾.

On November 22, a memorandum of the operations office of the Comando Supremo for the Chief of the General Staff General, prepared on the basis of data screened and discussed with Supermarina, came to conclusions very uncertain about the future but clear about what to do until Christmas. The situation in the Mediterranean Sea had become heavy, to say the least. In the eastern basin had only to take a strictly defensive attitude with the use, in principle, the use of aircraft and insidious naval means. The defense of Crete and the Aegean should be local, except for a prearranged intervention in mass of the Air Force. In the western basin it was guaranteed by a good defense in the naval forces of the Tyrrhenian Sea, the Ligurian coast and the French. Central Mediterranean, the supply of the Tunisian beachhead constituted fundamental and absolute condition for staying in North Africa. Its loss would mean permanently and irreversibly lost across Africa. That being the case, the direct supply,

by sea, of Tripolitania invested in secondary importance, it is preferable to secure from Tunisia by land or, at most, with coastal shipping. That said, it was possible to ensure whether the necessary traffic with Tunisia and to what extent. On the first point Supermarina asked for the immediate resumption of bomber offensive against Malta and the concentration of all the ships and vehicles escorting the one and only advantage of transport with Tunis and Bizerte. The maximum monthly obtainable, calculations roamed about 70,000 tons of materials, 40,000 of fuel, 20,000 men and 4,000 vehicles.

Now, Malta was raising his head quickly. The new demands on the west prevented the *Luftwaffe* to continue raids on the island and its operation *Stoneage* on November 20 had ended by allowing the big British convoy 13 MW to unload of large amounts of supplies and initiating regular trips. It was also obvious that soon the vessels and aircraft based in Malta would be increased. However, even assuming - and not given - to overlook the problem of the island and without taking into account losses, the operations office expressed the view that, unable to cope with all the necessities (influx of new organic divisions, sending of equipment, ordinary and extraordinary supplies), it was necessary to devote to the Tunisian theater every availability of transport, at least until they had passed the critical stage. The Libyan theater, therefore, had to make do with what there was in Tripolitania to earn at least a month, during which he would receive little or nothing. If you could not get this time the positions of el-Agheila, you had realized that with subsequent resistance between el-Agheila and Buerat. "The situation in Tunisia - finished the memorandum -between a month will tell whether it is necessary to continue to increase only the forces of Tunisia or whether, and how, it will be possible to give to Tripolitania: ensue subsequent attitude to hold in Tripolitania"⁽⁹⁵⁾.

Probably a similar concept, exposed with cold determination, would be received with better frame of mind by Bastico and Rommel, who continued to wait in vain for aid promised and always worrying about what happened in Tunisia, just behind the ACIT.

"It is my firm belief - Bastico wrote in his report on the operation cycle 16 November 1942 to 4 February 1943-that a superior directive clear and decisive, given in the second half of November, would allow him to fall back quietly, if you really had to withdraw, and to clear out without difficulties the equipment and the logistical facilities of Tripoli, and of preparing to defend the positions of Mareth far more firmly than what has been able to do."

And also Gen. Palma, the Intendente N.A., expressed the same regret: the lack of a "clear and unambiguous" vision of what you wanted to do, he said, constituted a heavy burden and prevent that the logistical effort was made as cheap as possible.

Now, if Hitler and the OKW, while acknowledging the severity of the events, openly expressed little interest in the events of the ACIT; if Mussolini and the Comando Supremo, while fully interested in African theater, reacted with an expansion of military occupations in Europe and ended up appearing more unrealistic than volitional overseas; Rommel had been considered coldly against the situation and draw the appropriate conclusions. Certainly he played to his advantage the lack of qualms of sentimental (abandonment of Libya) or Italian domestic politics (severe setback of fascism), but it is also true that Italy could not afford to lose unnecessarily the ACIT.

Assumed new responsibilities on November 16, Bastico found himself having to complain, and with excellent reasons, until the end of the mandate, ie until 31 January 1943. Against the Comando Supremo, because instead of giving instructions to the linear sent telegrams to compromise or even ambiguous, because it kept the repeated promises of supplies and reinforcements, because it left growing danger of an American penetration in central Tunisia. Against Rommel, why not obey the injunctions of Rome, because every time headlong abandons position causing drama in moving the services of the Intendenza.

However in its periodic protests to the Supreme Commander he always recognized the tremendous difficulties of the German field marshal, always he complained that the ACIT was in a sorry state for lack of everything, always corroborated the inability to conduct some combat maneuvered to fuel shortage and ammunition. And, for its part, he showed Rommel he realized the hardship besetting the top commander. "Marshal Bastico –he wrote later - he was basically a good person, weighted by military intelligence and considerable moral rectitude. He saw the situation like me, in its true light, but had the misfortune to have been appointed by the Comando Supremo to support the views of the Duce in front of me. Since this point of view was usually wrong, often he found himself short of arguments. In fact, always he took my side and with his mediating activity contributed greatly to the success of the retreat through Tripolitania, despite the senseless obstinacy of our superiors" ⁽⁹⁶⁾.

Between superiors who "insisted" there was Kesselring. He expressed strong will always reactive. When found that the few units hastily sent to Tunisia had been enough to stop the momentum before the ally, openly he lamented: sending more troops and better political skills would, he argued, led the French from the Axis and pushed the front up to Constantine. When the break in January made him realize that Eisenhower was tidying his forces would attack and at the appropriate time with certainty of success, warmly supported by Hitler and Goering reinforcement of other divisions to improve the defensive structure of the Tunisian beachhead. The organization of Mareth was still

under construction and the works they would not have been completed if not until mid-February, approximately. Therefore it argued that a rapid retreat of Rommel threatened to precipitate events.

"Our goal – he said to Hitler - must be to maintain separate the two armies, attacking them and then reject them later through movements for internal lines. I prefer not to immediate use of the army of Rommel, because it contrasts with the fundamental concept of the defense of Tunisia. I would be rather favorable to avail myself of some parts of such armed, but only in case no Rommel took advantage of the subtraction of these units to fight even more weakly and to accelerate even further the movement of retreat on Tunisia. I can not shake the suspicion, and I must clearly state my opinion, that after El Alamein not be fought decisively and with commitment, as the army of Africa used to do" ⁽⁹⁷⁾.

Rommel was not given to understood, however, while he was not very difficult to disentangle the directives and suggestions from the Comando Supremo or from the OKW or from the OBS with Bastico, which was in place and that he intended to follow the orders of Cavallero, confrontation became unavoidable.

The crucial friction between the two leaders took place at the time of the abandonment of the line Homs- Tarhuna. Bastico had accepted and endorsed the guidelines of "resistance to the bitter end" at el-Agheila, then those of "permanent cessation" to Buerat. And each time, after lengthy discussions, had been overtaken by Rommel, ready to find pretexts and excuses to follow his obsession to leave soon from Libya. Relegated to the positions of the army Homs- Tarhuna, which were entwined in the south front of Garian-Gialo-Nalut, he had to consider the withdraw coordinated by the ACIT, the troops of the Sahara and those of Tripolitania, as well as the heavy evacuation of Tunisia facilities of the Superintendency, with equipment and supplies, in the usual misery of transportation. It is obvious that in such situations the time, already important, become valuable.

The reporting of British armored vehicles, the 18th and the morning of 19 January, between Tarhuna and Garian and capturing a enemy document, showing the direction Garian-Zauia as the most profitable in the maneuver in progress, caused the sudden decision of Rommel placing a new withdraw, notifying the Comando Superiore only after orders already sent. *"Such hasty and destructive decision - said Bastico -can only be explained according to the mood and the trend of Marshal Rommel repeatedly shown (...)"* And Cavallero, not less angry, he told Mussalini that the feared bypass threat had to be seen more in terms of potential that is not in the real one, and, moreover, the dangerous column resulted in a brigade in difficulty for the poor ground conditions. And he was also careful to point out: *"But Mancinelli told me that in his decision Rommel had already taken three days & therefore can not be justified by the circumstances of the last day"*⁽⁹⁸⁾. After the war Mancinelli challenged

this assertion: "Cavallero said also, that too without any foundation, that Rommel had decided to fall back by at least three days"⁽⁹⁹⁾. In fact, at noon on the 17th, that is to say before they even move with the mobile troops to the positions of the ACIT Homs- Tarhuna, Rommel had discussed the situation with Giglioli in a tone of absolute pessimism, rejecting the idea of a resistance the bitter end on the above positions. Essentially, the talk was always the same - no serious fighting, worth the danger of the destruction of the army -But did not exclude a stop, at least in the absence of serious threat.

Rommel felt the accusation, especially since placed in relation to the hasty departure of the 21st *Panzer*, and wanted to explain to the Comando Supremo, for information to Mussolini, the events that had led to the surrender to resist in place. According to him, the morning of the 19th a strong British ensemble (a division reinforced by a pair of armored brigade, for a total of 200-600 tanks) tried to break through at Tarhuna. Rejected, especially by artillery fire, immediately he shifted the center of gravity of the attack to the west, while continuing to exert pressure from the south of Tarhuna. At noon the news about the enemy gave imminent, perhaps already in the night on the 20th, an attack on Garian (reported 1,400 vehicles with tanks), an attack on Tarhuna (main action), an effort along the coastal strip.

The continuation of the fighting sectors of Tarhuna and Homs would undoubtedly fully committed forces of the ACIT; if the enemy managed to move from the south on the road Tarhuna-Castel Benito would not stay to escape the defenses of Tarhuna; if the enemy had penetrated into the space between Garian and Tarhuna, focusing on Azizia-Zauia, west of Tripoli, it would be the end. That being the case, Rommel said the evening of the 19th became inevitable ordering the staggering depth of the army: the XX Corp with the *Giovani Fascisti* and the *Centauro* group in Zauia; the 164th Light with the *Luftwaffe* Brigade to the west of Tarhuna to block the road to Castel Benito; the XXI Corp with a third of his troops to the east of Tripoli to block the Via Balbi; the 90th Light in the rearguard of the axle Homs-Tripoli. Such staggering, almost entirely completed by the morning of the 20th, certainly weakened further resistance positions Homs- Tarhuna, but allowed the recovery of non-motorized infantry and foiled any attempt to circumvent.

"The conduct of the fighting - Rommel concluded - justifies in my opinion the decision of the 19th evening. If he had done the staggering of the army in depth and if the mass of the army had remained in positions Tarhuna-Homs (...) the enemy would be able to encircle the army and to prevent its supplies overland"⁽¹⁰⁰⁾.

Mancinelli, present for the events, rejected the assumption that Rommel might have deliberately "inflated" the signs of the

outflanking column in order to draw from the episode pretext to resume freedom of action; while he felt not to exclude an error of assessment, on the other hand more than justified by the circumstances and by the tension of a leader "condemned" to comply with directives from him considered, whether wrongly or rightly, ruinous for the salvation of the army.

The six weeks that the Comando Supremo had set as minimum time frame to gain were reduced as a single, 15 to 23 January. Until the last Rommel was able to act as he wanted. Perhaps, as claimed Bastico, could without too much difficulty earning as a couple of more weeks. Perhaps it facilitated the solution of the problem of Montgomery's logistics abandoning Tripoli. The fact that saved the ACIT and brought in good working order on the positions of Mareth. And this was admirable.

At the same time the need to recover the greater part of the ACIT after leaving Egypt, the Comando Superiore - and for ten days even Deleaze - found struggling with huge problems: the removal of as much as possible from Cyrenaica, reconstitution of the ACIT, reordering the rear.

As soon as the progress of the offensive British took a turn that revealed the inevitability of a deep recession of the logistical device, it soon became clear the massive complexity of the issue, although not easy at the time to calculate the extent of the measures to be taken. It was necessary, in fact, steal the capture large quantities of materials of all kinds, possibly retrieving them, if not destroying them. And also the need arose to provide somehow the fate of thousands of civilians.

There was already some experience of large fluctuations of the war, but the last victorious advance of the ACIT had led the troops in the heart of Egypt, by imposing, as a result, the transfer to the border and beyond a large part of the organization of the Intendenza. Now there was the danger of heavy losses in logistics, danger all the more relevant considering the meager flow of supplies from the motherland and the poverty of Tripolitania. This, in fact, had suffered extensive damage by aerial bombing of the *Royal Air Force* and witnessed rapid thinning supplies when all maritime traffic was moved Ports of Cyrenaica and in particular of Tobruk, and then continue with the coastal shipping up to Marsa Matruh. To provide an idea of the consequences of such gravity to the east, few appear to be sufficient data. In the three months from August to October fifty ships and landing craft, of about 130 departing from Italy, had been sunk and a dozen forced to return damaged to the national ports and Greek.

On the needs of the ACIT is polarized care and attention of Deleaze and of the Intendenza. After all it was understandable that this happened, however, in mid-November in all Tripolitania and in Sirtica there

was just 640 tons petrol, 870 diesel, 4,900 of flour, 125,000 rounds of small arms and the rest in proportion. In summary, 50 days of food, fuel and two four *unfoc*, calculated of course only for the troops employed by the Comando Superiore. Even without leaving the detailed analysis, just by the constraints that conditioned the solution of the problem: the huge distances on a single road, pounded by the *Royal Air Force*; painful shortage of vehicles; tight time limits.

The first concrete news about the fate of the ACIT, provided to Superlibia Nov. 12 by an officer of Deleaze and tell a few days before, gave a picture that would be starkly realistic, but that in fact ... was optimistic:

X Corp: divisions *Brescia*, *Pavia* and *Folgore* lost;

XXI Corp: the *Trento* lost, the *Bologna* lost half;

XX Corp: The *Trieste* lost half, the *Littorio* at two-thirds, *Ariete* reduced in half with just thirty-efficient tanks;

Pistoia: deployed at Halfaya with four battalions and three groups of artillery;

Giovani Fascisti: in withdrawal into Gialo with three battalions (plus IV Libyan battalion) and four groups;

Army support units: recoverable perhaps up to seven batteries 149/28 and units of engineers:

Services of the Intendenza: lost the logistics center of El Daba; the bulk of the depots and establishments in the course of withdraw.

At the same time there was the need to establish a defensive position at el-Agheila. First question: the vehicles available. Having everything in full retreat westward, they lacked reliable data to assess the means of transport on which to rely; moreover, the mass was heavily worn and three of the four car parks in Cyrenaica had abandoned much of the equipment. On the other hand, in Tripolitania it was just the bare essentials for the life of the units at the site. So the transfer of the *La Spezia* to el-Agheila was performed in three subsequent echelons (twelve days in all), scraping together trucks and buses from the work in progress, port services and urban ones. The energetic supervision placed on the collection and re-order the vehicles exuberant to the remains of the divisions or arbitrarily confiscated from the units during the retreat, yields can still put together a strong maneuvering Truck Bn. of 500 means.

In this respect, it is moved by the remark Bastico Rommel about the unruly exodus of German trucks, loaded with personal and material of all kinds, to Tripoli; exodus that was compounded by "*the tumultuous way in which it was carried out by withdrawing motorized services from the Germans*" resulting in unpleasant incidents against and unpleasant. Objectivity wants that we should also point out the flaws

of our house. At that time, directed a tirade Bastico to Commanded XXI Corp of Tripolitania, the 5th Air Fleet and to the Intendenza N.A: *"As was the case in previous retreats, again, unfortunately, came out an impressive number of vehicles , amply provided with fuel, which cleared from Tripolitania material at all useless for military purposes. This shows that the vehicles are there, but they are not used as they should be (...)"* ⁽¹⁰¹⁾.

Overcoming difficulties caused by continuing uncertainties guessed the strength to oppose the enemy gradually and sudden withdrawal of orders given by Rommel, he was able to evacuate into Tripolitania really: all the local authorities, some thousands of prisoners of war, infantry education centers, tank crews, artillery and anti-aircraft batteries around two thirds of by position, almost all the formations and the bodies of services of the Intendenza and the majority of stocks. Naturally they surfaced also organizational deficiencies, especially with regard to rescue or destruction of materials, equipment and infrastructure, primarily in Tobruk and Benghazi, the towns of major importance. Calculate the exact time of release, during a retreat conducted under pressure and the threat of the enemy, is something very difficult, and we also know the adverse effects caused by the sudden abolition of Deleasse and overlapping authority of the ACIT on the territorial dispositions. However, for example, it is difficult to explain failure to blasting of the British deposits of ammunition abandoned during the rapid retreat of the first months of 1942 and later found more or less intact by the 8th Army in November. In Benghazi, then, the Italian Commands were accused by Rommel of premature work of destruction of the facilities, but about 101 pieces of the Royal Marina and the maritime militia deployed or stored in some 100 cities fell into enemy hands. And when Bastico, puzzled, he asked for them Adm. Giartosio, he learned that the major drawback was due to a number of causes: the interweaving of the skills, the lack of trucks, the lateness of the order of eviction.

A rough estimate of the overall losses suffered by the army since the beginning of the battle of El Alamin to the ACIT deploying on positions of el-Agheila provides the following data:

- Personnel: 30,000 killed, wounded and missing;
- accompanying weapons: 81 mm. mortars, 110;
- anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons: 1,700 cannons and machine guns;
- artillery pieces: 380;
- medium tanks: 460;
- light tanks: 50;
- armored cars: 40;
- vehicles: 5,300.

To these must be added the materials lost by the Intendenza:

Health: 430 tons ;
 food: 1,700 tons;
 clothing and equipment: 1,600 tons;
 ammunition 11.000 tons;
 engineers: 5,000 tons;
 Chemical: 250 tons;
 Fuel: 700 tons ;
 vehicles: 2,700, of which more than half inefficient.

In view of the foregoing, it is not difficult to imagine the effort made by Comando Superiore to give a certain appearance to large operational units escaped from the British offensive ⁽¹⁰²⁾. Already in early December were on the positions of al-Agheila four divisions, an armored group, two groups of army artillery, six battalions engineers and several smaller units of various arms.

The last phase of the retreat involved obviously painful sacrifices. He was able to transfer to Tunisia almost all services and about one third of the allocations of stock. Most sensitive were the losses by the services of the engineers and artillery for reasons of weight and space, such as the precious fabric of strengthening and building (hence the lament Bastico for the failure to complete the defenses of Mareth) and projectiles 149 and 152, as well as an additional 2,000 vehicles being repaired at the parks. Even civil organizations (Fiat, Lancia and Gilera) were able to fall back 80% of machinery and 50% of the spare parts.

Very difficult was the problem of the civilian population, problems which were connected even emotional reasons and a duty of human solidarity. It was more than 50,000 people, with all the household goods that in most cases the only removable goods to them remained. Their eviction in Italy proved virtually impossible on a route totally insecure and threatened by all types of threats. Bastico but had proposed the idea of a massive evacuation of merchant prior open appeal to the sense of humanity of the opponent, but the proposal was rejected by Rome about the negative impact that such massive exodus would result in the troops still engaged to el-Agheila. Even the evacuation into Tunisia appeared impractical; apart from the insurmountable difficulties of ordinary transport, the measure could not be considered definitive, but only a postponement of the solution with the worsening of the already precarious conditions of Italian nationals..

December 28 Cavallero assured Mussolini had everything prepared "*to leave Tripolitania in a situation very tidy, waiting for our return. I have established, for any kind of need, two months*" and January 2, 1943, decided the abandonment of the line

of Buerat, he pointed out: "*All civilian personnel will stay in place in order to give a show of order and organization*" ⁽¹⁰³⁾. As a result, gradually the troops retreated, they were handed over to local authorities kinds necessary for the needs of a month of life of the population. Likewise he was careful to leave the greatest possible efficiency every public service, including water and electricity plants renouncing destruction that would hurt the opponent but put in a deep crisis the civilians ⁽¹⁰⁴⁾. It was the least that could be done in concrete demonstration of solidarity, human; but it was also the most difficult circumstances in which it was achieved.

NOTES TO CHAPTER III

- (1) B. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, cit., P. 359.
- (2) *Ibid*, p. 369. *Confirming that some comments had to circulate, it deserves mention the testimony of Mar. Antonio Bragadin: "At the end of November 1942, a group of young and not so young Supermarina officers - knowing the severity of the war situation - are induced to make express secretly to the King their beliefs, for Italy, to leave the war. Bearer of the message was the Grand Admiral Thaon Revel, personal advisor of King and dean of the Navy. The response of the sovereign was not bad, indeed manifest with similar concerns and intentions, while declaring the need to await certain developments, decisive but not yet vested"*(*Il dramma della Marina italiana, 1940-1945*, Oscar Mondadori, Milan 1982, pp. 230-231).
- (3) It is worth emphasizing the fact that, despite the uncertainties in the battle of El Alamein on the retreat, the Italian Superintendency (Gen Palma) has been able to keeping intact the team performing the services in order during the withdraw. The losses, consequently, were very modest, except for the transport service and the automotive service.
- (4) During the month of November, the ACIT had received about 5,000 tons of fuel of 13,000 departed; 2,500 tons ammunition of 2,600 departed; 3,000 of 3,300 of food; 450 of materials about 550. In total, about 19,500 tons. consigned from Italy, about 11,000 had arrived and 8,500 sunk.
- (5) At Gabes were sent in those days: the LX machine gunners Battalion, the 290th Reg. Artillery of the border with some battery, two tank companies of the 31st Tank, a company of the 5th Bersaglieri motorcyclists, a company of 20 from the *Ariete* and some organs of the services.
- (6) DSCSFAL, date 12/03/1942, minutes of the interview.
- (7) Gen. De Stefanis, who returned to Libya on November 24, had been recalled home the following day.
- (8) The Arch of Fileni, on Via Balbi, not to be confused with the Arch Fileni, thirty kilometers to the south-east, off the road. The Arch, erected in memory of the Carthaginian Fileni brothers, who allowed themselves to be buried on the spot, once marked the boundary between Carthage and Cyrene.
- (9) The Cantaluppi group, named after the general who commanded, was the new name of the XX Corp group fighting (sometimes called group *Ariete*). It was formed by the I and II/66th Inf., XIV and XVII/31st Tank, *Monferrato* armored group, DII/131st Art. of 90 mm. and III/3rd Art. of 75/27.
- (10) The fuel situation was such that if he had made the need to withdraw mobile troops, these would not have possessed even the basic necessities for achieving the new line (DSCSFAL, tele 5498 date 11/12/1942, 17:15 of Gen. Mancinelli).
- (11) DSCSFAL, message No. 417 11/12/1942 date, hours 21:35, from the ACIT. Bastico replies to remain in their own conviction. However, he observed, it was appropriate for the *Pistoia* instead of staying simple stop astride the Balbia, assume at least an a deployment matching to the circumstances.
- (12) DSCSFAL, F.01/20282/Op. date 11/12/1942 - Attachment. 9. This letter hit the susceptibility of the Comando Supremo. Ten days after coming to Bastico a long and strange reply, the condescending tone that is used to make it clear to an employee a situation that escapes him completely. The first part was placed in evidence that Superlibia could not know the severity of the sacrifices imposed by the Comando Supremo of the R. Marina and to the R. Aeronautica to supply troops in Libya. The second illustrated the difficulties and attempts to overcome them. Finally, after explaining that "*you were forced to decide on the withdrawal on Buerat*" because of the lack of influx of reinforcements judged in agreement required for the position of el-Agheila, the letter concluded that in such a framework, in fact, was been called the task "*for now*" assigned to the ACIT' buy time while waiting for the improved situation in Tunisia allows to convey back to Libya forces, weapons and the means that are needed "(DSCS, tele 34212/Op. date 12/22/1942).

- (13) F.H. Hinsley, *op. cited* above, pp. 451-458.
 - (14) Montgomery wrote: "I issued my orders on 11 December and immediately began a tactic of raids on a large scale. The enemy took the raids for the main attack and was unnerved; in the early hours of 13 December began to retreat protection provided by a rearguard the 90th Light Division" (*Da El Alamein al fiume Sangro*, Garzanti, Milan, 1950, p. 46).
- In fact, what Montgomery called 'raids' he was taken by Rommel in their exact meaning of preliminary actions and not confused with the real attack, planned instead for 13 (ie the day before the British plan) and which was to stop going to escape in time, without being hooked.
- (15) B. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, cit., P. 373. Rommel wanted to decorate the person the commander of the I/66th, Cap. Politi, with the Iron Cross of the 1st Class.
 - (16) British intercepted messages saying that "the bottle is to be corked."
 - (17) I.S.O. Playfair, *op. cited* above, p. 226.
 - (18) DSCSFAL, f.01/20465/Op. date 12/15/1942.
 - (19) DSCSFAL, date 12/17/1942, shorthand note of the meeting. The claims reached at that meeting he engaged a short friction between Bastico and Mancinelli, caused by different version, in translation, of two concepts.
- The first it concerned withdrawing on the line Homs-Garian Bastico that was perfectly willing to study, but did not give more for granted. The second concerned a sentence of Rommel: "*But I do not assume the responsibility to take away, if any [defense to the bitter end to Buerat] Italian non-motorized divisions.*"
- Mancinelli made it all clear: the possibility of leaving for Buerat Homs was intended subjected to scrutiny and affirmation of Rommel did not mean disclaimer, but unable to save the infantry, once engaged in combat. And, above all, in the face of doubts arose within the Comando Superiore about the actual availability of fuel of the ACIT, Mancinelli was very loyal, "*he must rule that Rommel adduce reasons which do not arise to behave otherwise. Bypass Merduma & Nofilia & are actually not pretexts (...). Without these circumstances we do not withdraw the as is the case today*" -(DSCSFAL, tele. 5542 date 12/18/1942, at 20:10 of Gen. Mancinelli).
- (20) According to the information services of the Axis, the enemy device included: astride the Via Balbi the 51st Inf. Div., the 10th Arm. Div. and a French battalion; south of the roadway the 2nd New Zealand Inf. Div., the 7th Arm. Div. and Greek elements; in the second row the 9th Australian Inf. Div. and elements of the 44th Inf. Div. Be noted that the 10th Arm. Div. This given was considered the identification of the 8th Arm. Bd., known as belonging to the 10th Arm. Div.
 - (21) DSCSFAL, tele. 5537 date 12/18/1942, 9:15 am, the Gen. Mancinelli.
 - (22) DSCSFAL, F.01/20584/Op. date 12/17/1942 - Annex n. 10. It is worth quoting the comment made by Rommel with his wife in his letter of the 18th: "*Even Bastico was very depressed yesterday*" (B. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, cit. P. 376). But we also add that according to a letter Goebbels the aide of Rommel, Berndt, painted an atmosphere of extreme tension: "*The officers surrounding Rommel came to the point to take everything with a cheer from death row inmates. He has done all that is possible (...) but the elemental forces are stronger than us*" (Joseph Goebbels, *Diario intimo*, Mondadori, Milan, 1948, p. 343).
 - (23) DSCS, tele 34129 Op. Date 12/18/1942, 22.30. The Bastico letter of the 15th had arrived in Rome during the journey of Cavallero to Rastenburg war headquarters of the OKW (16-21 December). So it was read to the phone on the morning of the 19th by Gen. Magli, clerk at the Comando Supremo, together with the response prepared by the operations office. Cavallero approved and did specify that it was a "categorical order of the Duce" (*Diary Cavallero*, date 12/19/1942).
 - (24) DSCSFAL, tele. 20669/Op. date 12/19/1942, hour 10:30
 - (25) DSCSFAL, tele. 5951 / Serv. On 12/19/1942, 18:30.
 - (26) DSCSFAL, tele. 3540 date 12/19/1942, 22:55 hours, from the ACIT.

- (27) DSCSFAL, tele. 3548 date 12/20/1942, 10:00 hours of the ACIT.
- (28) Diary Cavallero, date 12/20/1942.
- (29) In this regard, Col. von. Waldenburg OKW announced: "*The Marshal Cavallero has the point of view that for now you have to keep positions of Buerat at any cost (...).*"
- (30) DSCS, tele. 34157 /Op. Date 12/20/1942, 21:20 hours.
- (31) DSCS, tele. 34155 / Op. date 12/20/1942, 21:25 hours.
- (32) DSCSFAL, date 12/20/1942, tele. 01/20741 / Op., 20:50.
- (33) DSCSFAL, tele. 3550 date 12/21/1942, 10:30. The message was sent for information to the Comando Supremo and the OKW.
- (34) DSCSFAL, tele. 01/20773 / Op. date 12/21/1942, 12 o'clock.
- (35) DSCSFAL, tele. 01/20791 / Op. date 12/21/1942, 20:15.
- (36) DSCSFAL, tele. 01/20774 / Op. date 12/21/1942, 13:10 - Annex n. 11.
- (37) *Diary Cavallero*, date 22.12.1942.
- (38) *Ibid.* By then, the deficiencies of the German units of the ACIT hovering around the following percentages compared to the organic: 75% tanks, cannons controcarri 80%, field pieces 70%, motor vehicles 40%, staff 45%.
- (39) Since 22 December, the Cantaluppi group had changed its name to *Centauro* group. It was made up of the I/66th Inf., 31st Tank, III Group *Monferrato* armored cars, DII group 90/53.
- (40) On December 22, during the retreat of the 21st *Panzer* on the *uadi* Bei el-Chebir, Gen. von Randow and his chief of G.S. They were killed by the explosion of a mine.
- (41) DSCSFAL, tele. 01/20873/Op. date 12/23/1942, 14:30. The shorthand notes of the meeting lack Kesselring's comments, but it can be made in private.
- (42) DSCSFAL, tele. 01/20951 / Op. date 12/25/1942, 13:10.
- (43) It should be explained that between 21 and 25 December the ACIT had received a total of 556 tons. of gasoline and 4.3 cubic meters of fuel oil. The gasoline was so low that, according to the command of the army, the bulk of the German columns of supply was more or less immobilized between the front and Misurata.
- (44) DSCSFAL, tele. 01/2098 /Op. date 12/26/1942, hours 11:20.
- (45) *Diary Cavallero*, date 12/26/1942.
- (46) *Ibid.*, date 12/26/1942.
- (47) DSCS, f. 34245 / Op. date 12/27/1942 -Annex n. 12.
- (48) *Diary Cavallero*, date 12/27/1942. Directives (f. 34245 / Op.) Were signed but not dated, pending approval by Mussolini. They were to be delivered to Bastico only on receipt of a conventional telegram of the Comando Supremo. Gandin also had to explain a entry the concept of defense "*As long as possible.*"
- (49) Rommel began with a "*What's news his Excellency Bastico brings us?*" Learning that the only news discreet concerned the arrival of 700 tons. Car gasoline and better then aviation, said: "*Better than nothing!*" (DSCSFAL, date 28.12.1942. Stenographic notes of the interview and paintings of the High Command no. 01/20181/Op., The same day, at 15:30).
- (50) Cavallero dispelled the uncertainty for Gandin with tele. 34260/Op. date 12/28/1942, 20:45, and established that the directives carrying the date of 27 December.
- (51) Rommel insisted that the formal order authorizing the withdrawal of the infantry was signed by Bastico. He reserved, however, the timing of such withdrawal. As he explained in his journal, he intended to prevent a serious charge by the Comando Supremo.
- (52) DSCSFAL, date 12/31/1942, shorthand notes of the interview. The result of the conversation was communicated to the Comando Supremo with tele. 01/21240/Op. same date -Annex n. 13. Prior to the meeting, Kesselring had wanted to communicate the information about the units at his disposal of the area of Gabes: operational dependency of the German 5th Army, administrative and logistical support from the Comando Superiore of Libya, under the command of Gen. De Stefanis sent in place by the Comando Supremo. Bastico replies that a similar responsibility except everything was functional and suggested to orient differently, ie on a single command and.

- (53) DSCSFAL, tele. 16/42 date 12/31/1942, 22:35, of the ACIT -Annex n. 14.
- (54) The positions Homs-Gussabat- Tarhuna-Garian were occupied by the following units. Sector Homs: none as it is intended to be manned by the bulk of the ACIT. Tarhuna sector: II/350th Inf., IV and V Libyan battalion, a armored cars squadron of the *Nizza*, a squadron of *spahis*, a group of Libyans in formation squadrons and 334th group 77/28. Garian sector: I/ 350th Inf. (-), V Camicie Nere Battalion, I Libyan battalion, *Novara* machine gun squads group, a armored car squadron of the *Nizza*.
- (55) DSCS, tele. 30/G date 12/31/1942 3, at 21:00 of Gen. Gandin.
- (56) *Diary* Cavallero. On this occasion, Kesselring informed that Hitler would communicate their thoughts on the issue of the single command in Africa (instead of writing directly to Mussolini) for subsequent agreements with the Comando Supremo.
- (57) The 7th Arm. Div. consisted of the 8th Arm. Bd. (57 *Sherman*, 27 *Grant*, 58 *Crusader* and 4 *Stuart*) and the 4th Light Arm. Bd. (whose component tanks was limited to forty means of the *Royal Scots Greys*, employed tactically by the *New Zealand* division).
- (58) DSCS, tele. 30013/Op. On 01/01/1943, at 21:00, Attachment. 15.
- (59) G. Mancinelli, *op. cited* above, p. 249.
- (60) DSCSFAL, tele. 01/23 / Op. date 01/01/1943, hours 11:45.
- (61) DSCSFAL, tele. 01/146 / Op. date 01/03/1943, 20:30.
- (62) DSCSFAL, tele. 01/194 / Op. Date 01/04/1943.
- (63) F.H. Hinsley, *op. cited* above, pp. 459-460.
- (64) *Diary* Cavallero, date 01/06/1943.
- (65) The same evening Kesselring phoned Gen. Jodl, at the OKW, to report briefly on the conversation with Cavallero. According to the interception of telephone communication, Kesselring is reserved to explain in person "*all the information needed to judge the situation.*" Then he noticed that "*Rommel's talk was certainly not funny*" and added that "*what you hear there, in relevant circles, is not even funny*" (*Diario* Cavallero, date 01/10/1943).
- (66) A further cause for concern is caused by a record of those days: "*News of Europe Press about the appointment of v. Arnim to Comandante Supremo of Tunisia. Consequent effects of Rommel and his attitude. Please envisage to Marshal Kesselring the need not to make these references in the press, also to give the people the impression that the Italian commander is Italian. We need to work in silence*" (*Diary* Cavallero, date 01/09/1943).
- (67) DSCS, tele. 7/43/582 segr. date 01/11/1943, 23:45, of the ACIT.
- (68) The *Centauro* deployed in Tunisia with the 132nd Anti-tank regiment (three battalions), 5th Bersaglieri (a battalion and minor elements), the 18th Carabinieri battalion mot., Three groups of artillery).
- (69) The order of the Comando Supremo (DSCS, tele. 30179/Op. On 01/12/1943, at 14:00) was sent to *Superlibia* but also handed over to the German solders in Rome, which warned the ACIT directly. Bastico, therefore, was taken aback when, at the same time the telegram of the Comando Supremo, received the following message from Rommel: "*I had the resolution of the Duce (...) directly by the Comando Supremo. So communication on your part is not necessary is more*". Understandably annoyed, Bastico regretted with Cavallero: "*I do not hide that, also at safeguarding the prestige of my superior commander, I would have liked that orders, although in contrast at my point of view that I have communicated with radio 01/644, were given to Marshal Rommel through me (...)*" (DSCSF AL, tele. 01/655/Op. date 01/13/1942, 12.50 pm).
- (70) DSCSF AL, tele. 01/760/Op. On 01/14/1943, at 14:00. Bastico commented the telegram ensuring that he reiterated once again the need to gain two months ordered by Mussolini, "*but my long experience leaves me very little hope.*"
- (71) Kesselring reported the recommendation summary of Hitler: "*Tell the Duce we*

do everything we can, but our hands are tied by the Russian question, which must be absolutely resolved" (Diary Cavallero, date 01/15/1943).

- (72) On January 3, the ACIT signaled to the Comando Supremo a monthly requirement of ordinary supplies amounting to 12 to 18,000 tons, Divided into: 6 to 12,000 tons fuel, 3,000 of food, 1,500 ammunition, 1,500 of miscellaneous. This quantity was necessary to add 5,000 tons monthly to cover the losses of weapons and means. Overall, it was 17-23000 tons, For which the allocation of 20,000 tons per month would allow a real improvement of the efficiency of the German units (tele. 30/43 date 01/03/1943, 21:45).

At the same time, however, to the OBS forwarded a request for the January to 30,000 tons. Based on this indication, the German Quartermaster in Rome summed up the need for the German troops in Africa as follows: 30,000 tons for ACIT, 17,000 tons for the 5th Armored Army, 13,000 tons for the *Luftwaffe* (divided, this proportion between the two armies).

Ultimately, considering that about 25,000 tons were of fuel, the availability of 35,000 tons cargo more use of tankers would absorbed Germanic needs.

- (73) B. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, cit., P. 384.

- (74) DSCS, tele. 30207/Op. date 01/13/1943, 19:20 hours. The telegram stated that the cession of material to the 15th *Panzer* had to take place taking into account what the 21st would find in the new field "*so that its efficiency appears not inferior to the present.*" Evidently, in Rome it was believed that Rommel have given the progress to the measure - ordered, repeats, in character of immediacy - with comfortable.

- (75) DSCS, tele. 30269/Op. date 01/18/1943, 13:15. In the message, there was also some superfluous sententious sentence tone: "*Import not to engage the enemy forces & at the same time doing everything possible to maintain maximum unit mobility "and" it is a must therefore continue operating according to the guidelines so far given and try to earn as much as time possible.*"

- (76) The supervision of Gat, totally isolated and devoid of vehicles, was surrounded since the 19th by formations of France Saharan Africa. He refused for return, continued resistance until the 24th, when his survivors, reduced to a hundred and vain view the possibility of any outside help, surrendered.

- (77) In total, were recovered the following units: the LV battalion complements of the *Savona* (messenger in day in Hon), five companies of the Sahara, a company 81 mortars, a unit of fast tanks, the *Lodi* group (which lost nearly all his L6 tanks for engine failure or buried in sand), three Libyan companies, two field batteries and two 20 mm.

Losses concerning seven Libyan machinegun companies, a Saharan motorized company, two companies *Meharists* two irregular bands, a L tank squadron, a A/A battery of 20/35 and seven batteries of 77/28.

- (78) B. Montgomery, op. cited above, p. 56.

- (79) B. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, cit., P. 386.

- (80) *Ibid*, p. 387.

- (81) DSCSFAL, tele. 01/1071/Op. On 01/19/1943, at 23:25.

- (82) *Ibid*, tele. 01/1073/Op. date 01/19/1943, 23:50 hours.

- (83) *Diary Cavallero*, date 01/19/1943.

- (84) *Ibid*, date 01/20/1943.

- (85) *Ibid*, date 01/20/1943. Quoted in *The Rommel Papers* Liddell Hart the episode is remembered in a different way: with more color but less accuracy. According to Rommel "*early in the morning [20] came a message of Marshal Cavallero*" with trailers which Mussolini. "*We stood in awe - he wrote - when we received the telegram (...)*" (p.388). Instead the diary Cavallero emerges beyond doubt that the dispatch was dictated by the chief of General Staff Gen. Giglioli around 14:30 of the 20th and delivered to Rommel between 16:00 and 18:00.

- (86) DSCS, tele 314/Segr. date 01/20/1943 of the ACIT. Also according to Rommel: "*Immediately* [the morning of 20] *telegraphed in regard to the Comando Supremo, but*

- that same afternoon I had the opportunity to speak to Marshal Cavallero himself (...) "(p. 389). In fact the communication was sent in the night, more precisely, as mentioned, in the bottom of the bulletin of the 20th.*
- (87) DSCFAL, tele. 7/V on 01/21/1943. Cavallero closed the televio with insurance out of place: *"I do all that is in me to ensure that this does not happen." That day Ciano wrote in his diary: "To the succession of Cavallero (Mussolini has confirmed to me as imminent) [the Gen. Ame, head of SIM] believes that the name of Ago is the best" (G. Ciano, op. cited above, p. 691)*
- (88) B. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel papers*, cit., P. 391. (99) *Ibid*, p. 391.
- (90) *Ibid*. But two days later Rommel wrote to his wife that *"in a few days I will leave the command of an Italian for the sole reason that my alleged health allows me not to go forward. Of course it is a very different reason, namely prestige. I did everything I could to save this theater of war, in spite of indescribable difficulty in every field. I regret deeply for my men. I have very dear. Physically I'm still not very good. Severe headaches and strong nervous tension, as well as circulatory disorders, do not let me rest (...) "(pp. 391-392). It is evident bitterness. Even before El Alamein had happened something like that!*
- (91) DSCS, tele. 014/Op. date 01/26/1943, 19:30.
- (92) The Comando Superiore of the Armed Forces of Libya had moved to Sfax since Jan. 25. was dissolved at zero hour on 5 February.
- (93) *Diary Cavallero*, date 11/08/1942.
- (94) *Ibid*, date 11/15/1942. Someone had sensed immediately the size of the strategic turning point and thought of radical measures. Among the first to believe that Libya will most likely be ordered and that, on balance, agree to focus on defense of the metropolitan area, there were Vittorio Emanuele III (cfr. P. Putoni, op. Cited above, pp. 103-104) and Mussolini (cfr. G. Ciano, op. cited above, p. 664)."
- (95) Memo dated 11/22/1942 *"under extraordinary views from the ground."*
- (96) B. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, cit., P. 382.
- (97) A. Kesselring, op. cited above, p. 156.
- (98) *Diary Cavallero*, tele 4 / V date 01/20/1943, 22:15.
- (99) G. Mancinelli, *op. cited above*, p. 253.
- (100) DSCS, tele. 324/43 date 01/22/1943 of the ACIT.
- (101) DSCSFAL, f. 3459/Serv. date 11/15/1942. A few days later, apparently Bastico thought about the question if he considers appropriate to advise *"If you were to repeat again the crime of illegally holding transport vehicles sent, notified that I will make criminally responsible the chief of the GS of large units" (DSCSF AL, f. 3769 / Serv. date 11/20/1942).*
- (102) On November 21, had been officially dissolved the X Corps command, the Inf. Divs. *Pavia, Brescia, Bologna, Trento and Folgore*, the Arm. Divs. *Ariete and Littorio*, plus numerous corps and army supports.
- (103) *Diary Cavallero*, stated dates.
- (104) You can not say it was easy to get a full understanding on the part of Germany, which, looking only wartime needs, in some cases proved overzealous and sometimes not about them at the appropriate time

CHAPTER FOUR

THE WAR IN TUNISIA

1. THE OCCUPATION OF TUNISIA BY THE AXIS (December 1942).

After the attempt to occupy Bizerte and Tunis with a kind of coup, Gen. Eveleigh decided a break of a few days to allow better organization of the support aircraft for the land battle.

Meanwhile he took off a raid direct behind the defenses of Bizerte. In the early hours of 1 December the allied 1st *Commandos* carried out a surprise landing on the northern coast of Tunisia, north-west of the city. It was about 500 men with the mission to infiltrate the German rear and block the Bizerte -Mateur road. Initially the plan seemed to take place under good conditions, because at 02:30 the Commander of the XC Corp he limited his order to increased coastal surveillance since were intercepted radio messages in English, as on the occasion of the raid on Dieppe.

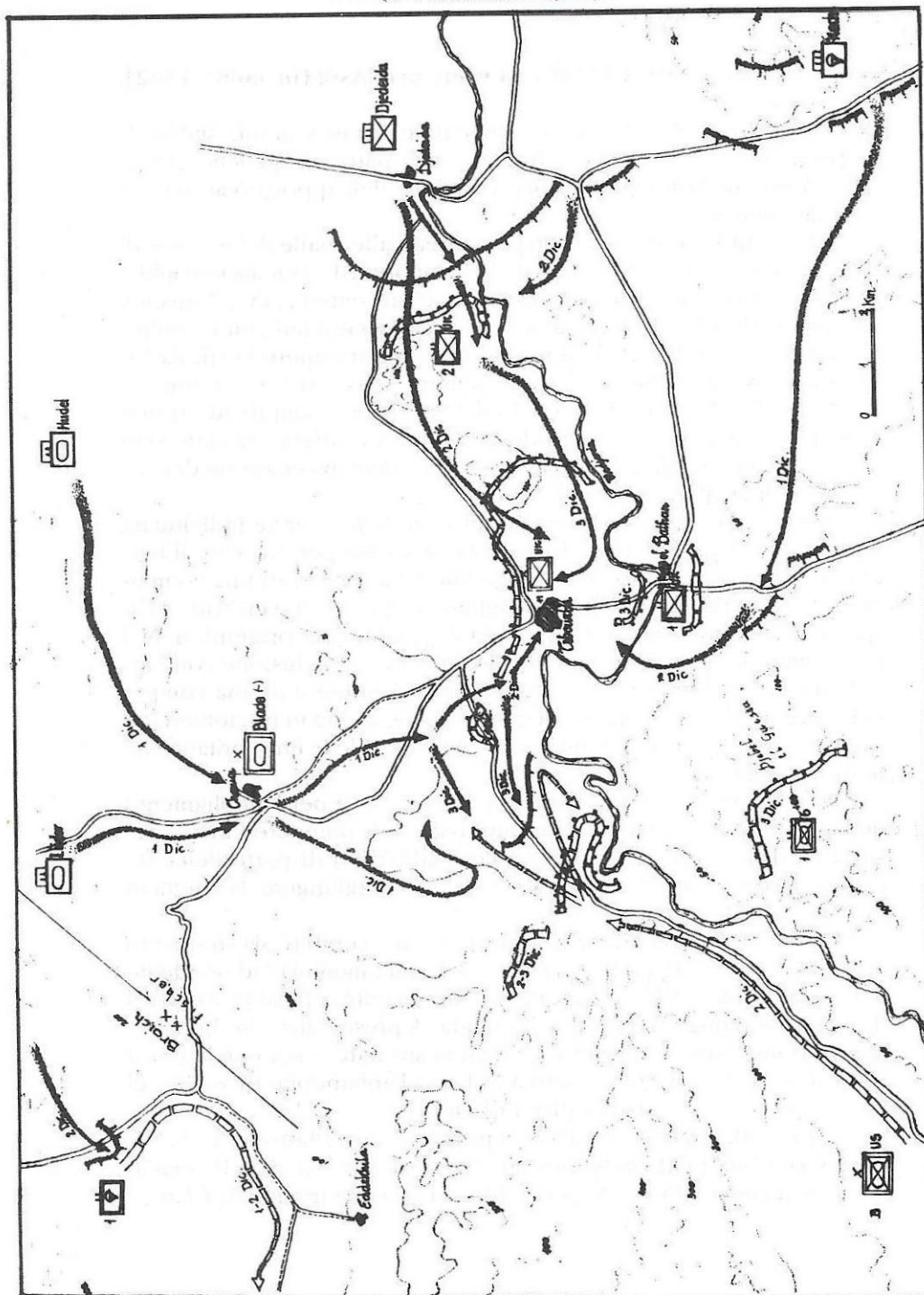
Soon, however, the presence of the *Commando* was identified and 10th Bersaglieri, the nearest unit, moved to block the attempt. The first contact took place at 10:00 by a company of the XXXIV Bersaglieri battalion: the enemy group dispersed, leaving in Italian hands fifty prisoners. In the afternoon, the story came to its natural conclusion with the intervention of the bulk of the XVI Bersaglieri battalion and a German company. The *commandos* suffered heavy losses, even prisoners, and gave up their remaining holds, regaining to British lines in a few days.

At the same time, at the insistence of Kesselring to expand the beachhead, Gen. Nehring resolved to take the initiative. The card to play was represented by the arrival of the 10th *Panzerdivision* (Gen. Fischer); the goal to be achieved, the close of Tebourba (sketch n. 31).

Tebourba held considerable importance both as a road junction and, above all, because the pass of the same name (to the west of the town) allowed conditions of defense against incursions from the west much better than non Djedeida. Regardless, also, from the tactical question was necessary at all costs to give breath to Tunis and Kesselring had not forgiven Nehring for abandoning Medjez el Bab, the gateway to the plain of Tunis.

Allied forces were located at key points in the area. The 11th Inf. Bd. (Gen. Cass) had the II *Hampshire* a couple of kilometers from Djedeida; I *East Surrey* at the El Bathan, to cover the right flank; V *Northamptonshire*

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(1-4 dicembre 1942)



with the II/13th Tank and the American 5th artillery at Tebourba - where, incidentally, still he held a company of German paratroopers -; the 17th/21st Lancers with artillery to the pass of Tebourba. The left side was guaranteed by the *Blade Force*, which for a week was added the American I/1st Arm., deployed at Chouigui (five kilometers north-west of Tebourba).

Gen. Fischer had articulated his heterogeneous troops "in four battle groups and intended to achieve the complete envelopment of the enemy. The Luder *group* (a tank company, a motorcycle and a field battery) and the Hudel *group* (two companies of I/7th *Panzerregiment*, two anti-tank companies and one of motorcycle), led personally by Fischer, had to reach Chouigui with a wide enveloping movement from the north and then go down on Tebourba. The Koch (a battalion of the 5th paratroopers, a German and an Italian anti-tank company) had the task of attacking from the southeast, occupying El Bathan and its bridge. The Djedeida *group* (a paratroopers company, two infantry and a few armored vehicles, two *Tiger*, two Pzkw III and three tank destroyers) instead had to limit himself to engage the enemy front gently, at least at first.

Fischer's counterattack began shortly before 08:00 and got a quick success. Around noon the *Blade Force* was overwhelmed and fled into Tebourba in disorder, while groups Luder and Hudel from north-west and south by the Koch shook the Anglo-American troops more or less between the roadway and the river of Tebourba Medjerda. The only point where the German thrust failed to develop was before Djedeida. Here the assailant *group*, who had moved in the afternoon on the orders of Fischer, saw it fall into the void every attempt.

At dusk the situation of the Allies would not show up very brightly. Overnight Gen. Cass ran for cover. He backed the II *Hampshire* up to a couple of kilometers from Tebourba and pushed north of the pass the V *Northamptonshire* to face the Hudel *group*. For his part, Gen. Eveleigh saw fit to send the *Combat Command B* (Gen. Oliver) of the American Arm. Div. to replace the *Blade Force* and counter-maneuver.

On December 2, the II/6th Arm. Inf. and the American I/13th Tanks reached the pass of Tebourba. The immediate and violent momentum of the I/13th Tank came to reject the Luder *group*, but things have not changed in substance and the Germans at the end not only repulsed all the attacks of the I and II/13th Tank, but they tightened the circle. December 3, virtually ended the fighting. Taking advantage of the arrival of a couple of companies of the 86th *Panzergranadiere*, given immediately in reinforcing to the *Djedeida* *group*, and renewed raids of the *Luftwaffe*, Fischer resumed vehemently pressure on each side of the English 11th brigade.

Even the appearance of the American 1/6th Arm. Inf. south of the river, on the Djebel el Guessa, help much and the Allies had to fall back on the alignment Aroussa Djebel el-Jebel el Guessa. Their losses amounted to a total of 55 tanks, four armored cars, 4 anti-tank guns, 6 - 100 mm. pieces and as many 120 mm., 13 pieces of small caliber, 300 vehicles and a thousand prisoners.

That the German counterattack in Tebourba had a significance far greater than local success it was felt immediately by Gen. Anderson. On the one hand was to show that the Axis powers were beginning to acquire offensive capabilities, the other Allied troops had reached the limit of progression. He talked to Eisenhower and put in evidence that perhaps decisive factor was the impressive effectiveness of the support given by the *Luftwaffe* to operations is still underway. Indeed he added that if the *Royal Air Force* was not able to reduce the power of those raids at low altitude, to be inevitable to fall back just enough to get a protective "aerial umbrella".

On part of the Allies jurisdiction over British and American troops was entrusted to Gen. Allfrey, who moved on December 6 with the Command of 5th Army Corps to Souk el Khemis, in the valley of Medjerda River, about fifteen kilometers from Beja. On the same day he constituted the 242nd Group of the *Royal Air Force* for his direct support.

The 5th Corp including the 6th Arm. Div., the 78th Inf. Div., the 1st Para. Bd., the *Combat Command B* and other American non divisional units (see. chart on the next page).

For the Germans it was strike while the iron was hot and Gen. Fischer renewed the counterattack to drive even further back the enemy. On December 6 he started a violent action on the Djebel el Guessa. The Koch, assisted by the I/86th *Panzergradiere* and a unit of the 7th *Panzerregiment*, attacked the American I/6th Arm. Inf., as relief in the early afternoon by II/6th Arm. Inf. and a company of the 2/13th Tank, was forced to abandon the land.

This check greatly complicated the situation so that the Gen. Evelegh decided the retreat north of Medjerda, a position soon called conventionally and suggestively Longstop Hill, very close to Bab el Medjez. The retrograde movement, initiated under in the pouring rain on the night on December 7, continued for three days. In a letter to a friend, Eisenhower he expressed his considerations about the incident very explicit terms:

"I think the best way to describe our operations to date is to say that they have violated every recognized principle of war, are at odds with all the logistical and operational methods illustrated in the manual and will be condemned in their entirety in all classes of Leavenworth and War College for the next twenty-five years"⁽¹⁾.

Order of battle of the British 5 th Corp as of December 6, 1942
<p>Command 5th Corps (Gen. C. W. Allfrey)</p> <p>6th Arm. Div. (Gen. C.F Keightley) with: 26th Arm. Bd. (Gen. C.A.L. Dunphie) 38th Inf. Bd. (Gen. N. Russell) Divisional Troops</p> <p>78th Inf. Div. (Gen. V. Evelegh) with: 1st Guards Bd. (Gen. R.A.V. Copland-Griffiths) 11th Inf. Bd. (Gen. E.E.E. Cass) 36th Inf. Bd. (Gen. A.L. Kent-Lemon) Divisional Troops</p> <p>1st Paratroopers Bd. (Gen. E.W.C. Flavell)</p> <p>6th <i>Commandos</i></p> <p>Troops of the Army Corps</p> <p><i>Combat Command B</i> (*) (Gen. L.F. Oliver) with: 1/1st Tank Regt. I and II/13th Tank Regt. I and II/6th Arm. Inf. Regt. 27th Field Art. Bn. minor units</p> <p>Non divisional units: 67th Tank Regt. 5th 175th Field Art. Bn. minor units</p>

(*) The 1942 Organic of American armored division included two regiments of tanks (each with one battalion light tanks and four medium), one of three armored infantry battalions, three Bns. of armored artillery, a reconnaissance battalion, one armored engineering unit and minor services. The revised order of battle introduced later this year took the form of three tank battalions, three armored infantry, three Bns. of armored artillery, a engineer battalion, smaller units and services. This structure was designed for normal use of three *Combat Commands*.

The Germans had two problems to be solved urgently: the first concerned the French, according to the organization of the troops in Tunisia.

On December 6 Gen. Gause came from Rome with instructions to transmit to the Adm. Derrien, commander of the French naval forces in Tunisia, the ultimatum of Hitler. Derrien had to deliver every military installation and present the surrender of the French military, which would be sent to France or Italy as prisoners of war. The North African soldiers were classified in special units at the disposal of the German High Command. In case of refusal, Gause had carte blanche. Fortunately for him also had the II/7th *Panzerregiment* and an infantry battalion just landed. With these, the two battalions of the *San Marco* regiment and a training unit put together by Gen. Neuffer, commander of the 20th Flak Div. and of the Bizerte sector, was in condition to achieve the purpose.

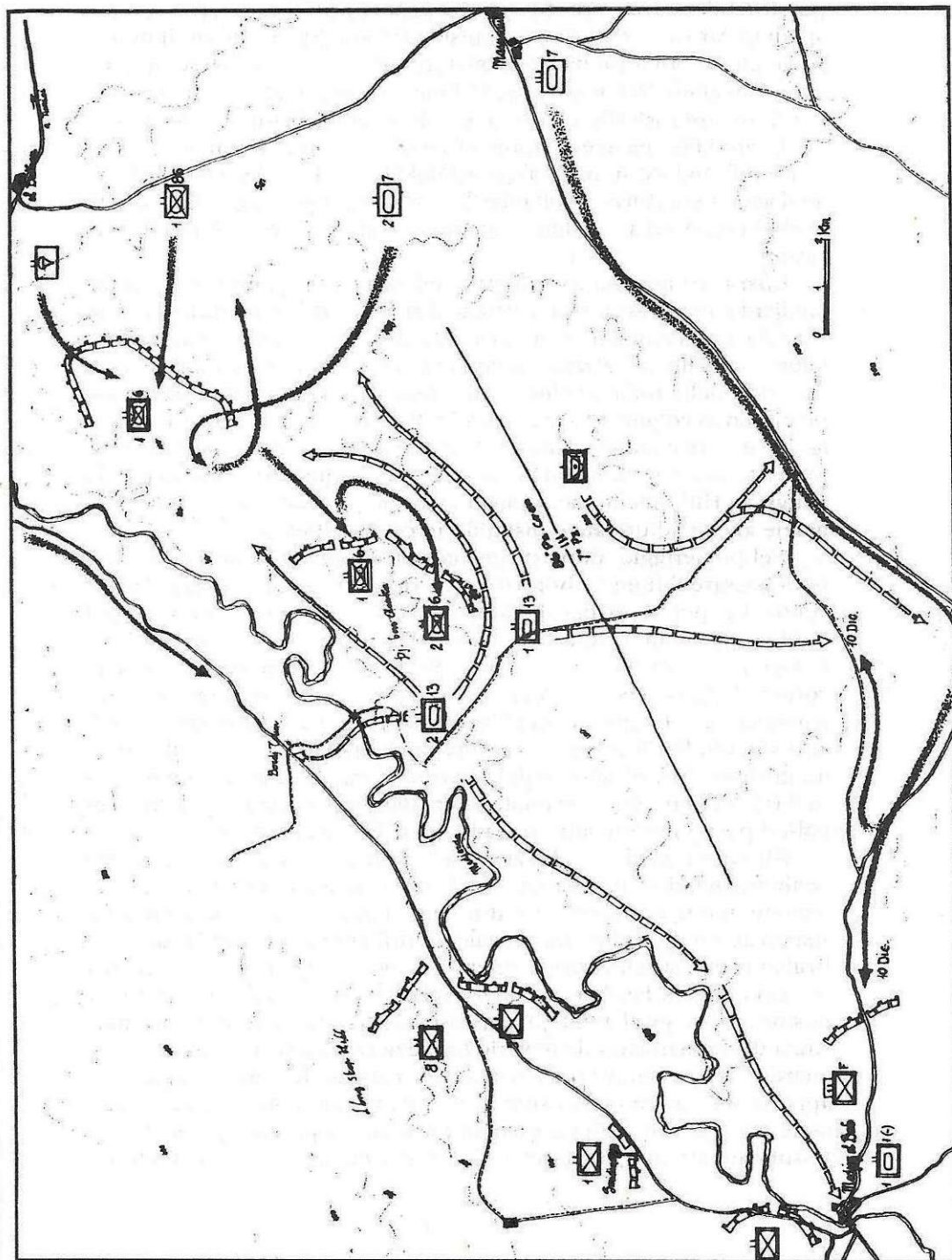
But there was something else that Gause said incidentally to Nehring taking him completely by surprise: On 8 December would come his successor.

A few days before they had been summoned to the headquarters of the Führer, Gen. von Arnim, commander of XXXIX Army Corps on the Russian front, and Gen. Ziegler, his Chief of Staff. The latter showed up first and was immediately received by Hitler: In Tunisia was to be formed the 5th Armored Army, von Arnim was appointed to run the command and he, Ziegler, would go with him as Chief of G.S. but above all as "permanent replacement with full powers". In other words, of von Arnim, whereby Rommel, had been made to visit the battlefield, the Commander of the army was to be a substitute with the authority to deal with unforeseen circumstances.

Ziegler said information on the expected strength of the army in question and Keitel, who attended the conversation, said that the program will provide for the deployment of three armored divisions and three motorized, the most powerful *Hermann Goering* of the Luftwaffe. Questioned in turn on the prospects he thought possible, Ziegler nodded an offensive from Tunis-Bizerte westbound with three goals in succession of phases.

Before the mountain range on the border with Algeria, then the ports of Bona and Philippeville and finally - if it was able to achieve an Arab revolt in favor of Germany - Grano. At this point, in his view, for the Allied invasion forces would not remain but to re-embark. As passed by an officer very concrete, Ziegler was leaving and obviously carried away by the complete ignorance of the reality of supplies overseas. But it may also be that, unable to express explicitly a negative opinion, he wanted to put in front of the Führer the enormity of the operational problem with a lot of diplomacy. In fact it specified that indispensable premise for a design that was the guarantee

IL SECONDO COMBATTIMENTO DI TEBOURBA
(10-12 dicembre 1942)



of a continuous and sufficient flow of supplies and, consequently, the conquest or the safe neutralization of Malta. Hitler assured supplies and did not speak of the island.

Shortly after he arrived von Arnim. Questions and answers were similar, so Hitler promoted both general to a higher grade and sent them to Africa. They arrived in Tunis on the evening of 8 December. The next day Nehring repatriated. On the morning of the 9th Gause presented himself in Bizerte to Adm. Derrien and poses an ultimatum giving half an hour to the answer. Derrien accepted the conditions and ordered the surrender.

Meanwhile Fischer had taken action. Knowing that the bulk of the English 11th Inf. Bd. was north of Medjerda and south of the river had been the only *Combat Command B* in the area of Djebel Bou Aoukaz, decided to gravitate with the effort against the Americans.

So the morning of the 10th attacked three German columns. North of Medjerda along the roadway, advanced the II/86th *Panzergranadiere* reinforced by a company of tanks. Against the positions held by 6th Arm. Inf. moves the I/86th *Panzergranadiere*, also reinforced. Further south, at the turn of the Messicault Medjez el-Bab roadway and so making a broad turning, he left the I/7th *Panzer* reinforced by a part of the 501st *Panzer* Battalion. At the end of the day, while the northern German column came to a halt a few kilometers from Longstop Hill, the southern had reported great success, thanks to a fatal mistake in the Allied camp.

In the afternoon, after several encounters, *Combat Command B* had to cross the Bordj Toun river and withdraw following the roadway. Except that, for an error of assessment, the head unit thought the bridge exposed to a German attack; therefore, abandoned the route prescribed and followed by the entire column, he took a track that ran along the east bank of the Medjerda. In short: the means were bogged down and we were forced to abandon 18 tanks, 40 vehicles and 150 other vehicles. Fortunately, east of Bab el Medjez had prepared a battle group of the French 4th *Tirailleurs*, who had already supported the I/1st Tank rather mistreated by the Germans, and that it facilitated the shift in the night on the other side of *Combat Command B*.

The clashes took place in the Tebourba can not really be treated as a battle. Nevertheless, and as the action did not concern an Italian sector, it wanted to give some space to an episode objectively brilliant for German weapons. Brilliant for the operational concept, the energetic action of the command of Gen. Fischer, for the tenacity of the unit; but above all, in our opinion, for the skill, aggression and ease tactics shown by the commanders of the various formations. Note in this regard that it was complex formed on the spot with just landed troops and the enemy situation was known only in general terms. Certainly something did not work, however, it did not affect the overall result. Fischer had to draw even on battalions

not organic and employ complementary units as they were. Of course, they provided a poor test and could not be otherwise, as we well know for our sad and unfortunately common experience. Fischer reported it, from day one, to Nehring in very hard terms, declaring impossible a success with similar troops, untrained and worst commander.

Even the *Superga* had conquered space, judging too huddled in Tunis positions held by his little strength, but it was not enough. The 13th von Arnim, taking advantage of the victorious achievements in the area of Tebourba, did lead the resistance line in the southern part of the beachhead at Pont du Fahs-Enfidaville. Since the continued arrival of units, Lorenzelli did make the division a conversion to the west, pin the right wing, so that on December 20 the defensive organization was significantly strengthened.

The 5th Armored Army was now divided into four sectors: Bizerte sector: German division formation von Broich; 10th Bersaglieri, *S. Marco* regiment,

Tunis sector North: 10th *Panzerdivision* and parts of the 334th Inf. Div.;

Tunis South sector: the bulk of the *Superga* Inf. Div.,

southern sector, divided into subsectors of Sousse (Italian 91st Inf. least two battalions), Sfax (50th special brigade) and Gabes (*Lodi* armored recon. grouping).

It must be noted that if in the area Biserta- Tunis was possible a certain division of responsibilities and tasks, across the vast southern sector, Enfidaville from the Libyan border, things took place in a very different manner. The great distances, the difficulty of communications, the width of the area to monitor the multiplicity of tasks to be tackled, the influx units piecemeal, many reasons in fact caused considerable overlapping of authority.

The subsector of Sousse, taken on Nov. 30 by the Command 91st Inf. (With II/91st Inf., And some units support weapons), depended for use by the Command 50th special brigade and the rest by the Command of the *Superga*, however practical reasons led soon the regimental commander to turn almost all the demands of tactical and logistical support to the 5th Arm. Army Command, while informing the Italian commands (the first radio link with Sfax was made on December 9).

On the other hand, for example, on December 16 the 5th Army Command ordered directly to the garrison of Kairouan (a company of the II/91st Inf. And one of the 47th *Panzergranadiere* arrived unannounced) to occupy the pass of Djeloula, some 25 kilometers north-west of Kairouan, on the eastern ridge. And the battle that ensued shortly thereafter against a couple of regiments of Algerian *Tirailleurs* and one of *Spahis*, and absorbed more and more Italian forces in the field, was followed at a distance by the 5th Army Command.

The subsector of Sfax, held by the 50th special brigade ⁽²⁾, did not

met no major operational problems and it was settled satisfactorily, even given the scale of the area. The same applies to the Recon *Lodi*.

On 23 December, the Gen. Lorenzelli was replaced by Gen. Gelich.

The occupation of Tunisia had led Italy and Germany to seek a supply of personnel by drawing on local volunteers. The Comando Supremo was limited enrollment of Italian citizens residing in Tunisia: those who already had served in the Italian military had to be recalled from leave and used as complements; the others were to be framed in such areas for special assignments. The response of the Italian colony was ready and the volunteers who put in a footnote to the Consulate General of Italy in Tunis soon surpassed the two thousand. On December 16, the first two companies were initiated in the field of Bou Fichta (twenty kilometers north of Enfidaville). They will be trained in all three battalions of volunteers Tunisians, two of which (the II and III) to the actual reduced and therefore later merged in to the XI battalion of two companies.

Meanwhile, in the mother country it was formed the T assault battalion of two companies with elements originating in Tunisia living in Italy. The battalion, which will arrive in Africa in the first half of January 1943, was completed on site with personnel chosen from the volunteers, and increased the gain from the additional selected, to create an assault group.

In the circumstances in which it held the recruitment and preparation of the units in question, there is not much wonder that the organization has now left to be desired; the amount of clothing and equipment had come from Italy, the same applies to the individual and unit armament, officers and non-commissioned officers and instructors were missing those for placement were few and almost entirely taken from the locals. On 17 December Leut. Col. Broccoli signaled Lorenzelli that "*General von Arnim complains of arrogance & indiscipline of the Italian soldiers announced that by day the 18th the soldiers caught red-handed robbery will be shot*" and, as the soldiers involved were Tunisian volunteers, represented the urgency of transferring them to the Training field of Zaghouan and the need for energetic officers of *Superga* for placement, in the place mentioned ⁽³⁾.

The Germans, however, turned their attention to the black troops. After the initial order to keep them ready under commanders responsible for the use by the German, von Arnim wanted to study the problem well, whose delicacy was evident. Therefore only the first of January will be disseminated implementing regulations, defining three types of elements to use: the Arab volunteers, assigned to the recruitment and training to a Command of Arab - German troops and making up special units; indigenous French soldiers demobilized to be used experimentally in two *goums* under the leadership of French officers and French equipment and armament;

Arabs suitable for the information service to use in news gathering and for sabotage.

The different orientation had its own reason for being, resulting from the impression given by the Germans to their presence in Tunisia; an imprint that will change substantially the psychological environment of the Axis war in Africa.

The Germans considered Tunisia as "their own" theater since the beginning, but all in all you have to admit that they acted according to a logic quite linear. From the moment Hitler had appointed a German commander in chief without any objection by Mussolini nor Cavallero, the organization of the occupied territory became a natural consequence of the measure. Germanic Command turned, therefore, every effort to relations with the population of the occupied area, French and Arabic, trying to ingratiate sympathies.

From France was immediately made to arrive the Plenipotentiary Minister von Rahn, with the task of monitoring the work of the civilian authorities left in their functions. The need for French collaboration, who, according to the German, would be impaired by even Italian, it should be made, according to our allies, that relations with local governments were governed only by the German side, which was granted the lack of territorial claims or aspirations.

The French population is divided between supporters for the "Free French" and "loyal to Petain", he showed a correct attitude on the whole against the Axis, but with a difference: Italians were frowned upon or, in the more benign cases, ignored ; the Germans were feared. This resulted in a certain deference towards these, which also seeks to take advantage of the propensity for visible condescension in the occupation. It must also point out that in the eyes of all, and especially the Arabs, the small but immediate and numerous successes against the first Anglo-Saxon threat of Bizerte and Tunis, had raised the very prestige of German arms and the constant, irreproachable and flaunted their transit of troops through Tunis constituted a show of strength and military power that could not but impress.

As for the Italian population of Tunisia, the initial enthusiasm generated by the intervention of the Axis took over soon a sense of bitterness and disappointment because the German presence was evident right from the start while the Italian proved decidedly modest. In a later time, for another, it begot an acute resentment caused by the unjust Germanic behavior, ready to show understanding and benevolence towards the French, we did not spare any Italians restrictions, as if they were enemies.

Of course the settlement of Nehring and then von Arnim is dabbled with care to lay hands on the local economy to take advantage of the country's resources. And, also in this field, German efficiency is put in full evidence with the timely arrival

of specialized organs, led by first-rate staff to energy and competence. Public organizations, private structures deemed useful, the plants and factories of military interest, the organization's French stewardship bloc, everything came under the strict German control.

Such a definition of possession, quickly extended to Tunisia through the office network controlled by the German garrison quartermaster of the army, could not be another source of friction. For the Germanic everything had to be bought or requisitioned only with his consent, with good written in German and signed by Germans. The pick up was operated by Germans regular requisition; what made directly by Italian became arbitrary act. Moreover, regardless of red tape, local frictions and squabbles, in principle - and no doubt due to the adaptability of Italian Commands - it reigned sufficient cooperation.

Positioned in to give the Axis troops in Tunisia for the establishment of a German Army Command suggested the forthcoming establishment of at least two army corps, but for the Italian forces was prolonged a strange uncertainty. The Command of the XXX Corps was held at the margin of what was implemented in beachhead not for hypothetical reasons of secrecy as, in all probability, for lack of clear ideas about sorting that it was intended to take on the new theater.

In mid-December I felt uncertainties. On the 16th Gen. Sogno was simply warned by the Comando Supremo that Kesselring would have liked to confer with him, possibly the next day, at the headquarters of Frascati. The conference was then moved to the 18th. Kesselring showed very cordial and very confident on the progress of the fight overseas. After a summary of the events made by one of his officers, he said that the initial crisis could now be surpassed and that the result would show the technical superiority of the Axis troops.

He pushed the optimism not to despair even be able to get the full cooperation of France. Although Gen. Barre, after an initial relatively friendly attitude, had revealed a marked hostility, so they do not deserve, in his opinion, the consideration due to a *man of honor*, in contrast, the Adm. Derrien had remained *true collaborator*. He did not speak of the ultimatum and threatening to burn Bizerte to the ground, direct cause of the lauded collaboration. On the subject of relations with the French, showing Kesselring amazed at the animosity of these against the Italians, Sogno said warning him about the real French feelings towards the Germans.

Finally, the Field Marshal promised to return the visit to Tunisia, where more than elsewhere, given the circumstances somewhat garbled,

the harmony between the allied commanders took particular value. He had no doubt that among von Arnim and Sogno would not have arisen the disagreements which emerged between Nehring and Lorenzelli, to iron out what he had caused the recall of the first. He was careful not to say that the repatriation of Nehring had been provoked by dissatisfaction aroused by his operational conduct and, especially, his pessimism about a victory in Africa.

Sogno vaguely knew the powers of Kesselring and was unaware of the true extent of its interference on the events in Tunisia, therefore, he considered the interview as a simple gesture of convenience. In the afternoon he went to the G.S. of the Army to report the details of the meeting. Gen. Ambrosio did not have much say in what was going on outside of the metropolitan area, but recommended to insist with Cavallero, when traveling to the headquarters of the Führer but that surely would have seen before embarking for Africa, for the prompt dispatch to Tunis of the *Livorno* Inf. Div.

Sogno was anxious to talk with Mussolini and Cavallero. Remembering well as Generals Benigni and Lorenzelli were left without precise instructions on the higher course of action to be taken even against the Germans, he expects a much more complete address. He will be disappointed.

On the 20th he was received by the Duce, which was held on generic and only seemed to express some dissatisfaction when Gen. Magli, attending the interview, summed up the existing Italian troops in Tunisia. Wherefore allowed as Sogno recalled the *Livorno*, belonging to XXX Corp, it was still in the motherland that there were no clues to his departure. Two days later it was the turn of Cavallero. He had just returned from Rastenburg, Kesselring had already seen leaving for Tripoli, and had concerns for the army of Rommel or better for Rommel's intentions to retire into Tunisia. Perhaps it foresaw the negative impression that the trip report by Ciano would raise in Mussolini⁽⁴⁾. Probably he reserved to know the thought of Kesselring, after the contacts he had with Bastico and Rommel, before taking a decision on the organization to be granted to Italian troops in Tunisia.

Received at the Comando Supremo, Sogno expounded their thoughts about the operational situation of the interested theater, but Cavallero "*did not answer with a practical appreciation*". He observed therefore still not being then constituted a beachhead around Tunis and Bizerte sufficiently robust and wide, so as to allow the use of troops released from concerns about port security behind them, but Cavallero "*objected, vaguely and without directly liaison on the subject proposed, that now, with the possibilities allowed to aviation, operating in mass, the old concept of limited beachheads had, in a way, be considered obsolete.*" The answer was strange and perhaps stemmed from the fact that Cavallero considered the issue pertaining to the Germans⁽⁵⁾. Instead

the head of the G.S. General dwelt on the importance of communications between Tunis and Tripoli relied absolutely on XXX Corp for the maintenance of the umbilical cord.

Obviously, Sogno insists on the dispatch the *Livorno* and once again was puzzled feeling that the *matter would be kept in mind and understanding* that had not yet been decided on the transfer overseas of the division and of many of the Corp's means. In essence, the visit proved disappointing. Sogno realized uncertainty about how to behave and of the indeterminate vision of predictable developments of existing struggle at the top. Also he reported the uneasy feeling that you do not want to openly oppose the intentions of Mussolini, but at the same time you would be able to ensure their full implementation.

Over all not so much worried about the subordination of all the Axis troops, the mixing of units and the limited sphere of action left to the XXX Corps for Italian troops. In fact, on the afternoon of the 26th, just landed at the airport of El Aouina, Sogno went to the German High Command. Von Arnim welcomed him with a quick placement and announced the intention to entrust the responsibility of the sectors of Sousse, Sfax and Gabes, while he would keep to their own directly to the bulk of the *Superga*, which was entrusted with the sector Tunis south, and the 10th Bersaglieri at Bizerte.

On balance, the XXX Corps would hold authority over part of the *Superga* and the 50th special brigade. Sogno, discontent, he expressed any objection on a subtraction of forces that did not seem justified by valid reasons of a military nature. Why, for example, was his jurisdiction not to include the area south of Tunis? Von Arnim merely promise that as soon as delivers a higher amount of German troops, he moved south all the remainder of the *Superga*, returning it to XXX Corp. However he assured that he would not touch the *Livorno* when it landed. With regard to the operating design, he declared the intention to reach the western side of the Grande Dorsale to control the outlets into the Central Plains.

Do you know the real thought of von Arnim on the future more or less immediate, but we know that he had received from Gen. Jodl an orientation of rather excessive breath. The OKW considered necessary the occupation of Tebessa for the decisive threat that would have resulted against the allied northern front. Von Arnim was not very impressed with that request and dismissed the idea without hesitation, even the conquest of Tebessa, the limited forces at his disposal would not have allowed the continuation of the effort on to Constantine, only significant from a strategic goal, and even to stay long in the zone. Moreover, a few days later, at the New Year's Day meeting, in Tunis, he turned to Sogno a toast: "*To Casablanca!*". About the interdependence of the two theaters of war, Tunisian and of Tripoli, while not advancing judgments and concrete intentions

recognized the importance of the task of XXX Corp: keep control of the "*long corridor*" of communications with Libya, in his opinion for the Comando Supremo and "*very easy to enunciate, but equally difficult to meet.*"

Sogno took his time: he wanted to become fully aware of how things were, fully inform the Comando Supremo and receive appropriate directives.

About the intentions of the enemy it agrees there news about an imminent offensive against targets Biserta- Tunis and Sfax-Gabes. The effort seemed northern assigned to the British 61st 46th Inf. Div. and 6th Arm. Div., the American 34th Inf. Div., the French division of Tunis and Algerian and Moroccan units reinforced by Allied tanks. The troops entrusted to the Southern effort was uncertainty, however, there was talk of mixed elements allied with French units that would go up in the area of *Chotts* well as considerable American contingent in Tebessa, oriented to focus on Gafsa.

Aside from the next upturn in ground attacks, enemy aviation continued to rage, punctuating with powerful attacks on major population centers, activity with virtually no breaks. This produced a trickle of losses of personnel, vehicles and materials, brought serious problems to the convoys; but above all he had to give back all use anti-aircraft machine guns and 20 anti-aircraft pieces initially diverted to ground tasks.

The spirit of the German troops is kept high because, despite the obvious disproportion of forces, frequent successes in combat had established an awareness of tactical superiority. The moral of the Italian troops, however, as no doubt good suffered the consequences of a clear position of inferiority towards the ally. Once more they had to sadly acknowledge the inadequacy of their armament compared to the Germans and availability of the power of the enemy. The same principle followed by Nehring and von Arnim, to keep in the line the infantry and artillery and non-motorized, use in maneuver action mobile units, if unexceptionable and unavoidable logic, sharpened the differences, because the armored troops (German) once you accomplished the task were withdrawn for a short rest and reorganization.

As for chopping up the units, Sogno noticed other negative effects. The establishment of areas of Sousse and Sfax had taken place mainly by drawing apart of the infantry of the *Superga*. Not that it was deliberate, since the rise of specific need, but in practice it was found that most of the units most "precious" – the 81 mm. mortar Battalion, the divisional I anti-tank battalion, the CI anti-tank 'Boehler' battalion, CCXXXIII and CXXXVI anti-tank Battalions - not that the entire 5th Field Artillery (less a battery) were left to the sector of the *Superga*,

that is under control of the 5th Army, not at all willing to give up something.

They were coming grouping of the 29th Corps Artillery of four groups of 105/32 and 3rd anti-aircraft artillery regiment of two groups and two of 75/46 to 90/53. For instance their influx, started in mid-December and completed by January 1943, initially escaped the 5th Army Command that will fail to divert them in their own sector to the adamant opposition of Sogno ⁽⁷⁾. In such crisis he stood the lack of specialists. On 17 December, Gen. Lorenzelli had telegraphed to the Chief of the Army:

"317/0p. I'm not a soldier of the engineers from the day I arrived, except that the company Radio Officers Please reinforce with three stations R 4 ceded to the 50th brigade. Urge send artisans, telegrapher with their parks. Communications are limited to the meager resources available."

Add that beside deficiencies more or less explicable, other surfaced just unacceptable. For example, on December 28 the commander of the 91st Infantry (and of the sector of Sousse), already long-suffering, was admitted to a military hospital and then cleared to Italy by air. The Commander of XXX Corp requested the immediate replacement, as well as sending a second colonel to be devoted to the 50th special brigade for operational needs. Well, despite repeated requests, the first colonel will come from the mother country on March 5, the second on April 10 when the brigade will no longer be in the line!⁽⁸⁾.

After the failures in northern Tunisia, in the Allied camp it was necessary pause for thought. Eisenhower, who had cultivated the hope of getting Tunis as Christmas present, judged the situation "disastrous", but refused to allow the withdrawal of 5th Corp of Allfrey and ordered instead repeating the attempt before the bad weather bog down operations. Not only the beginning of the campaign concerned. The harmony among the Allies demanded a continuous effort of conviction and conciliation. Between the British and Americans it was immediately revealed a difference of address: the first loved studying complex problems in conferences to take account of the various aspects and come to a systematic planning; the latter, at least initially, preferred to assign to a master to the task and leaving him the freedom of means and responsibility to plan (which is subject to approval superior) and execution.

But this diversity of work, soon overcome because the use of troops of different nationalities showed the opportunity of the British method, it was nothing compared to the positions of nationalistic character. Eisenhower did not hesitate to send Anderson US units, in order to accelerate the conquest of Tunis. But his co-workers were unhappy. It then became clear that the British did not know how to get the best return for the American soldiers: "*Anderson*

- observed Gen. Clark - used *our troops piecemeal, interspersed with British troops, so that the results suffered* ⁽⁹⁾.

Worse occurred in relations with the French. Giraud found it very natural to propose Eisenhower (17 December) that the chief command in Tunisia be attributed both to a general agreement made at the time in Gibraltar, it is because the French in the line were about 40,000. Naturally, the request fell on deaf ears, however, obtained an autonomous sector entrusted to the detachment of the army commanded by Gen. Juin.

In mid-December the line reached by the Allies saw the 5th Corp of Allfrey to the north, from the sea up to twenty kilometers south-west of Pont du Fahs; the detachment of the army of Juin along much of the eastern ridge, more or less to the height of Tebessa; Finally, the forming American 2nd Corp ⁽¹⁰⁾, including French units, in the large area of Tebessa-Gafsa. The outlook in the three operational areas so summarily indicated differed significantly. To the north it was decided to resume the offensive as soon as possible. To the south it was still necessary to give an organic appearance to heterogeneous units in place. There remained the central section of the front. There was deployed the bulk of the French troops: Gen. Barre with the division of Tunisia and part of Morocco (Gen. Mathenet) and, further south, the 19th Corp (Gen. Koeltz) with the division of Algiers (Gen. Deligne), a light mechanized brigade (Col. du Vigier) and smaller units. A group of forces, therefore, more than enough to cause difficulties for the sectors of Tunis and south of Kairouan.

Allfrey devoted himself to intensive preparations, the essence of which was logistical: it was necessary to amass in the rear of the corps supplies for six to nine days of heavy fighting. Also taking advantage of the railway line in the valley of Medjerda what could not be obtained before 22 December. And this became the chosen date. The design included two operating efforts staggered over time but appropriately harmonized. The 1st Brigade of Guards (Gen. Copland-Griffith) had to move on the 22nd from Longstop Hill and ensure the possession of some positions in succession until are beyond Tebourba to ensure security of the left flank of the 6th Arm. Div. (Gen. Keightley), which two days later would start along the Massicault- Tunis direction.

Things went wrong from the outset due to two major unexpected drawbacks. First the Germans had well assessed the tactical importance of Longstop Hill and entrusted the defense of the area to a group consisting of a battalion of the 69th *Panzergranadiere*, one of 754th *Grenadiere* and one of the 7th *Panzer*. In the second place, precisely on the afternoon of the 22nd began a series of torrential rain.

Battles loomed once very hard, they profited much the intervention of the American I/18th Infantry. Finally, in the afternoon of Christmas Gen. Allfrey resigned himself to stop the operation with Longstop

Hill in German hands and more than 500 casualties among British and American. Meanwhile Eisenhower and Anderson had traveled to the Command of the 5th Corp wanted to take a look at the front and see the start of the 6th Arm. Div. The news received by the 78th Inf. Div., the flood almost uninterrupted and the sea of mud appeared sufficient to convince them of the convenience and stop attempting to send him back in better weather. That same evening of Christmas Eve was held a final meeting. According to some present Anderson appeared "*deeply depressed*" and spoke with the same hesitation and Eisenhower did not appear to "*inspire confidence*". Inevitably, the decision was made to give up any offensive during the rainy season. He returned to his headquarters, Eisenhower telegraphed the Combined Chiefs of Staff:

"(...) Due to continuous rains there can be no hope of an immediate attack on Tunis. You can attempt again later with a methodical advance of the infantry. I'm trying to organize and feed a complex of forces to act offensively on the southern front" ⁽¹¹⁾.

Just during this inspection tour, Eisenhower had met Juin at the headquarters of 5th Corp and, taking advantage of the circumstances, he probed the ground, asking him if, possibly, would agree to be placed in the employ of Gen. Anderson, as required by the 2nd U.S. Corp Juin did not hesitate to answer in the affirmative, what disagreed with energy that night by Giraud: "*I do not want absolutely -the reprimanded - you to move on to the orders of this English. You will be my and since command to remain two-heads, divided between Eisenhower and me, I will force to bring home to Constantine to follow the operations more closely and better coordinate them*" ⁽¹²⁾.

Juin spoke having had first hand the reality. Its purpose rooted concerned the conquest of the main points of the *Grande Dorsale*. So, Barre had to reach the area of Pont du Fahs and cover the left side of 19th Corp, which belonged to occupy the narrow places in the central part of the chain. Seeing the British stuck and feeling much safer in a broken and mountainous, where his infantry could move easily, had abruptly decided to attempt it alone, looking for success by surprise. The operation was entrusted to five battalions, a group of *tabors* and a pair of artillery groups.

Barre had then approached Allfrey so that the 6th Arm. Div. would provide security in the preliminary phase. The response of Allfrey was simple: really was about to attack too, and precisely in the direction Tebourka- Tunis, however it had no objection to ... give precedence. Meanwhile, under the orders of von Arnim, the *Superga* had penetrated the mountainous area of link between the two ridges, organizing the front hastily and precisely target the opposing French. The sector of the division presented

eleven company level cornerstones, supported by just five batteries from 75/18, on a front of fifty kilometers. It would not be difficult for the enemy to concentrate here and there forces adequate to turn the modest Italian static structures and achieve the desired success.

But partly because the attack was diluted on a width of fifteen kilometers, in part for the painful conditions of the land, in part perhaps because of insufficient collaboration of fire, every effort French soon became clear was in vain. Under these conditions Barre resigned himself to suspend the fighting.

Except that on the evening of December 23 Juin ordered to try again and began to provide the last battalion of Moroccan 7th *tirailleurs* remained to and until then jealously kept in reserve. Allfrey also allowed the loan of a company of US light tanks. This time the battle was led by Gen. Mathenet, commander of the division of Morocco. At the dawn of the 27th the action began. They were over run the left of the German T 5 battalion and Italian I/92nd, and the southern wing of the sector. After various stages of struggle, some positions were occupied by the enemy, but not very meaningful.

Further south, in the area of Kairouan, just taken on the 27th by Gen. Benigni, the French activity is manifested with less consistency, so as not to make any necessary remodeling of the defense. However, remained in Allied hands the pass of Nejjarin Okbi (or Nejjarin Haouareb) on the Sbeitla-Kairouan road, and that of Faïd on Sbeitla-Sfax. However it was a fragile balance of weaknesses on both sides.

Juin realized that to go it alone in the undertaking, in those circumstances, it would have been madness, especially considering the precarious supply lines due to raging storm. In this climate of general uncertainty, Giraud did not find better than to explicitly reaffirm the opportunity that the French contingent was placed in a large American unit:

"I must take into account - Anderson announced on December 28 - the mood of my troops and some of my officers. You must remember that the British and French fought each other recently in Syria. Many of my men have not forgotten what the British did to the French navy at Mers el Kebir and Dakar. It is not desirable, at this time, that French troops are placed under the command of a British commander. I do not share these feelings, but you must recognize that they exist. We need to find a solution, such as that of an American command"⁽¹³⁾.

Juin felt obliged to intervene and on 1 January addressed to his commander in chief a long personal letter. He expounded the regret of Anderson for the unpleasant position. He recalled a sentence of Mar. Foch: "*He never could get anything from the British, even at the time of the unified Command, except through persuasion and an atmosphere of trust carefully cultivated. For*

they do not give orders." He explained that without some help British would have no hope of obtaining valid results. Since, therefore, that for a number of reasons or political commitments made at the time seemed inevitable destination of a British commander for the entire Allied front, *"il faut consentir, comme je le fais moi-même, sans souci de ma personne, à placer l'Armée française sous les ordres de Anderson"** ⁽¹⁴⁾.

2. THE OPERATION "EILBOTE" (January 1943).

The new year introduced the Axis need to quickly resolve some local problems and convenience to give a "brushed" entire eastern Dorsale finally to give a minimum of tranquility to the Italian- German front and the line of communications with Tripoli.

In the southern Tunis sector Gen. Gelich, met Maria von Arnim, had represented the urgent need for reinforcements to be used for dynamic response, otherwise impossible in the situation in which go through. The commander of the army and joined the request he made available, as of December 31, the German A-25 march battalion, four companies, and, just for a counterattack to the acquisition of fixed points on the Dorsale, a tank and a motorcycle company.

Between 1 and 4 January the action developed allowing all the I/92nd Inf. of the *Superga* the conquest of Djebel Chirieh, close to the weld between the Dorsale and the Eastern Dorsale, and the III/91st Inf. possession of the pass to Sidi Salah (the French called to Henchir Karachoum). All this despite the strong opposition of the 3rd *Tabor* respectively and of the 3rd Inf. of the Foreign *Legion*.

In correspondence to the sector of Kairouan, divided into sub-north (the *Grado* battalion, I/91st Inf., Two companies of the I/92nd Inf., XXIV/5th Bersaglieri and minor units) and sub-south (I and II/47th *Grenadiere* and the II/91st Inf. and smaller units), the most important goal was the pass of Nejjarin Okbi, controlled by French mechanized brigade. The operation was entrusted to the II/47th *Grenadiere* reinforced by the 190th Arm. Group. At 08:45 on January 3, two waves of *Stukas* bombed enemy positions and immediately after the Germans moved to the attack. At 9:30 the front of the III/2nd Algerian *Tirailleurs* was shattered and were useless intervention of American bombers and an attempt to counterattack. At 14:00 the battle was over and Nejjarin Okbi passed firmly into the hands of the II/47th *Grenadiere*.

While the French side there was going to prepare the reconquest of its lost positions in the Italian camp was to dissolve into an embarrassing kind situation. On December 26 Gen. Sogno was landed,

*French = must agree, as I do myself, without regard to my person, to place the French Army under the orders Anderson

he accompanied by his chief of staff and the commanders of artillery and engineers. Their arrival was preceded by a few days to much of the Command (operations office, information and services). Yet, after a week the command of the corps was not yet in operation. Reason for this: the absolute lack of means of connection, not sent from Italy although repeatedly urged. Inevitably, one day the head of the G.S. of the army ended up asking Lt.Col. Broccoli when the Italian commander would take the responsibility entrusted to him. And Sogno he realized that whatever validity they could collect his arguments, any further delay would be interpreted as a reluctance to take on the job. So the afternoon of January 7, he went to von Arnim communicating that by the 9th would establish their Tactical Command in Sousse. Von Arnim immediately offered the German aid for the issue and so links from the 12th to XXX Corp was added to the disposition, taking employs all Axis troops located in central Tunisia, roughly from Sousse to Sfax.

The division of this front was based on the three sectors of Sousse (Gen. Benigni), Kairouan (Lt.Col. Buhse) and Sfax (Gen. Imperiali). South of Sfax, in Gabes, had settled the *Centauro* Arm. Div. Centaur (Gen. Calvi di Bergolo) the orders of the High Command of Libya (sketch n. 33). Suffice it to say here that, according to the decision of the Comando Supremo, the 34th parallel (to Gafsa) represented the limit of jurisdiction between the 5th Armored Army and the Comando Superiore of Libya. Direct agreements had to allow any operations at the turn of that latitude and the area of Gabes, assigned to Gen. Calvi, down to a dozen kilometers south of the Chott Djerid-Gabes alignment. Moreover, those requirements were ignored by von Arnim who, fearing to lose some units from Tripoli, on January 10 he ordered Gen. Imperiali: "*Colonel Lequio (commander of Reco Lodi) with all troops so far belonging to the Gabes area and the Kebili troops, must continue only to receive orders from the Command troops Tunisia, through General Imperiali. Any exception would have serious operational consequences.*"

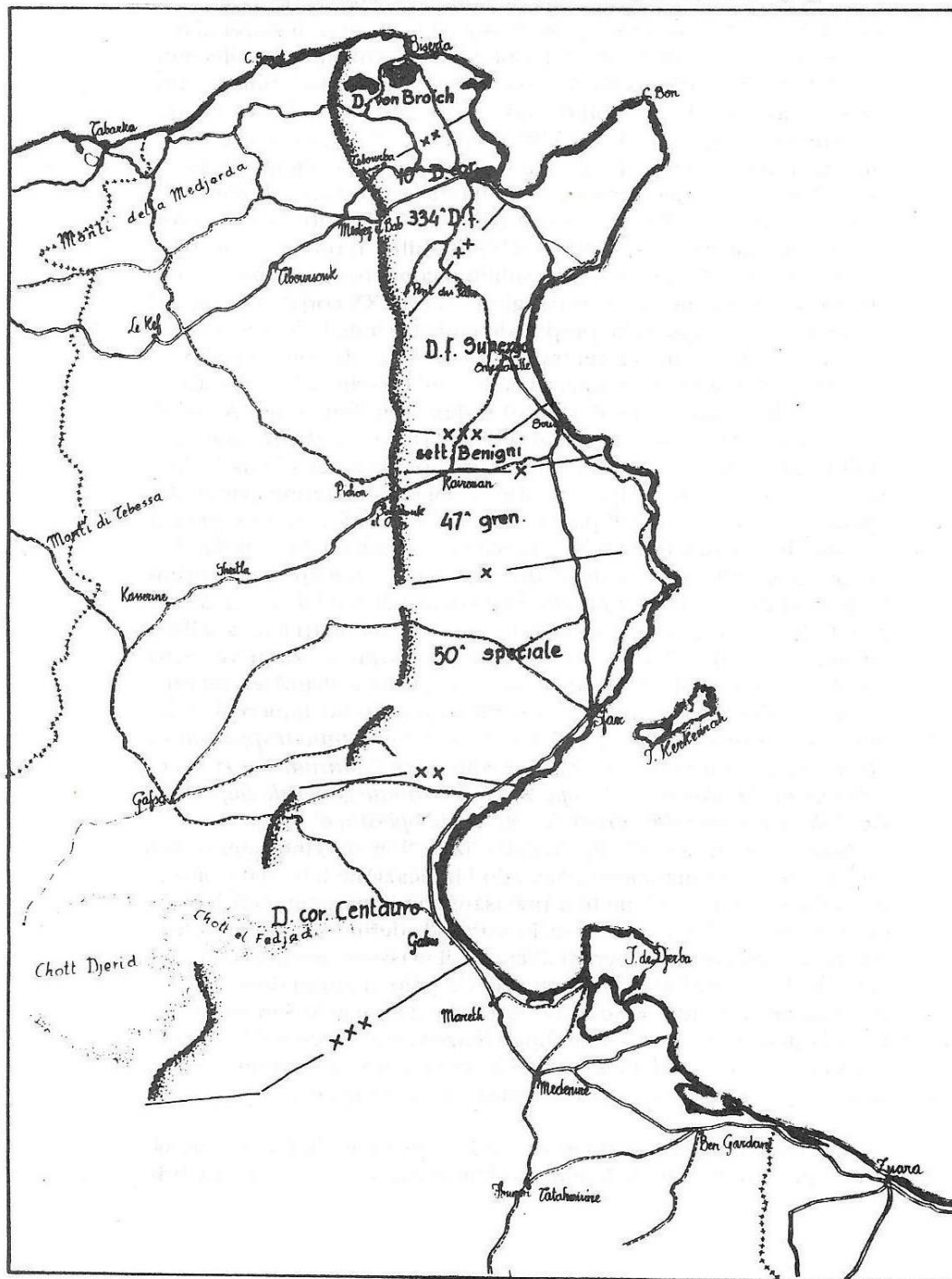
Sogno he saw himself passed over from the start. Not convinced, he omitted in his order of taking command indication made by the Commander of the 5th Army and simply point out that the southern edge of the sector of the XXX Corps was being established; then he strongly urged to Imperiali look after maximum agreement with Calvi and avoid conflicts of jurisdiction. A couple of days later he quickly lost the dispute essentially because the Comando Superiore of Libya poses the *Centauro* employed temporary by XXX Corp. There was, it is true, some dragging due to a direct interference of the Chief of Staff of the Armored Army, but without success.

In the Allied camp there was news. On January 10, the Eastern Task Force had assumed officially the name of the British 1st Army.

The Italian-German deployment 12 January

Schizzo n. 33.

IL DISPOSITIVO ITALO-TEDESCO IL 12 GENNAIO 1943



On day 4 had formed the American 5th Army (Gen. Clark), of which the bulk, located in Morocco and Algeria, was the troops watching Gen. Noguès the concern of German offensive through Spain and Spanish Morocco and fear that a reverse on the front of the Tunisian opposition gave life smoldering in French North Africa. Only the 2nd Corps (Gen. Fredendall), as we know, was to stand at the front.

The Allied Supreme Command were studying actions to be developed as soon as possible. The most striking and well seen by the Americans was the operation *Satin*, whose overall design had been approved since December 28. Eisenhower seems not had much sympathy for the territorial objectives, then discarded the idea of a push in depth stretching to seize Tunis and Bizerte, and concluded that the first goal to be achieved was the destruction of the army of Rommel⁽¹⁵⁾. This led him to approve an episode of Sfax. The solutions were three. The project A is expected to cut central Tunisian until Sfax and then advanced towards the north to reach Sousse; Project B was based on an attack in the direction of Gabes, followed by a progression along the coast until Sfax; C considered a breakthrough in the field of Kairouan and the continuation of the effort of Sousse. This latest project, unlike the other two, he accepted the idea of abandoning Sousse if and when you need to be shown. Before you even arrive at a choice, it was clear that the forces involved in *Satin* would be employed by the Allied High Command.

But the French were scrambling. Giraud held to support a leading role and on January 4 to Eisenhower introduced his own design based on an offensive - to launch as soon as possible - in direction of Sfax with the dual aim of establishing a barrier in front of the south up to the threshold Gabes and to allow the "sweeping" the whole coastline up to Cape Bon. After that he could act on the liberation of northern Tunisia. With this in mind, the US 2nd Corp would reach Sfax, the British 5th Corp would have taken control of the area of Pont du Fahs and detachment of the French army would be established on the Eastern Dorsale, keeping in connection with the two wings. It was a rather ambitious plan, which provided for the use of all Allied forces.

The decision was made on January 11 at Constantine. Eisenhower, Anderson, Juin and Fredendall discussed the possibilities that presented themselves to the different hypotheses and eventually Eisenhower concluded by defining the purpose of the operation: interrupt, within possible, the line of communication between Italy and Germany. Fredendall, responsible for operating, would have disposed of the following units: the U.S. 1st Arm. Div. (Gen. Ward), the U.S. 26th *Combat Team*, the British 1st Para. Bd. (Gen. Flavell), the French division of Constantine (Gen. Welvert). Approximate date, 22 January.

Giraud did not hide his dissatisfaction at seeing his plan "mutilated", but Americans supported the serious difficulties to feed an effort of greater consistency. Indeed they convinced Eisenhower to give up for that reason the use of the 1st Arm. Div.

In any case, the operation *Satin* must be preceded by two sectoral actions: one by the French 19th Corp with the help of American armored units to conquer Nejjarin Okbi; the other by the US 2nd Corp to reach the pass of El Guettar. As for the British 5th Corp, it was expected to be limited to local targets.

Partly for this directive, in part because planned independently, Giraud pointed to Juin the need for a solid arrangement of the detachment of the army on the Eastern Dorsale, between the basin of the *wadi* Kebir and Pichon. In other words, it was necessary to take over Djebel Chenoufs (south-east of the indicated basin), the pass of Sidi Salah and the two reliefs of Djebel Bou Hadjar and the Djebel el Ouchtatia. Juin assigned the first two goals to the Barre group (Tunisian troops, elements of the division of Morocco and units of the 19th Corp), the other from the 19th Corps of Koeltz (division of Algiers, Constantine division and the mechanized brigade) .

Altogether, Juin could count on 32 infantry battalions and four *Tabor*, an infantry so conspicuous, but still painful waiting for the promised aid in weapons and materials promised by Eisenhower. And, while the attrition was impacting on personnel and equipment, the bitterness and resentment of the leaders and the troops grew.

The stretch invested by the French attack involved the left of *Superga*: a front of less than twenty kilometers as the crow flies held by the III/91st Inf. (Sketch n. 34). On 11 January the Lagarde grouping of the division of Morocco tried to force the pass of Sidi Salah defended by a company of III/91st Inf.. After nearly six hours of fighting the defenders were overwhelmed; in return, the penetration was stopped by the German A-22 marching battalion, had just arrived and were placed in the second echelon.

This success achieved, the enemy is applied to widen the breach, attacking two days after the other three goals.

To the north the force III/3rd Inf. *Legion* engraved on the static structure of the southern I/92nd Inf., a company reinforced by German elements. The action was severe and caused heavy losses to both sides, but the position remained in Italian hands. Further south, however, the Hennoque grouping of the division of Algiers, previously occupied some useful hills, attacked the extreme left of the III/91st Inf. and it ended up being right of the small garrison, conquering Djebel el Ouchtatia.

As an inevitable consequence, the 9th Company of the III/91st arrayed on the Djebel Bou Hadjar, lost between the two positions in the sector, was forced to retreat leaving the complex mountainous to the *Spahis*. So twenty kilometers of the eastern Dorsale passed into French hands. A second line was hastily put together

Schizzo n. 34

A hand-drawn map of the Dj. Bou Boussou area, showing various locations, distances, and directions. The map includes labels for Dj. Solbia, Dj. Kouta, Dj. Chama, T5 f., Dj. Bou Kull, Dj. Chirich, Monastir, Lagarde, Dj. Bellone, Hernoque, and Dj. Bou Boussou. Distances are marked as 1/92° f., 102°/91°, 9°/91°, and 11°/91°. A scale bar at the bottom indicates 0 to 9 Km.

with the German 10th motorcyclists battalion, closely supported by the 190th armored group immediately sent by von Arnim to the area of Sbikta.

Under the circumstances, there was to fear a worsening local consequences, however unpredictable. Von Arnim began with the cancel *Olivenernte* (olive harvest) that some days before Kesselring had ordered against Medjez el Bab; then he studied action to wipe out the French from the eastern Dorsale and turning so quickly as to make possible the operation of the allies mobile reserves. The operation, called *Eilbote* (courier), was from Pont du Fahs and down along the front of the *Superga* sector (first phase or *Eilbote* I), continue to pass before the sector of Sousse and finally back the German lines in the sector Kairouan to Nejjarin Obki (second phase or *Eilbote* II).

A preliminary competition would be provided from the Koch column, pushed by the 10th *Panzer* towards Bou Arada to engage the English 6th Arm. Div. and keep it from moving to give a hand to the men of Juin. Just in this sector on January 13 the English 6th Arm. Div. had tried to prevent the consolidation of the positions occupied by the Germans, but the initiative had been so lukewarm conduct as to be absolutely useless. Apart from this precautionary tactic, while conducting *Eilbote*, all available units south of Tunis and Sousse areas had to move decisively as soon as the French had warned of the German pressure behind them (sketch n. 35).

The Kampfgruppe in charge of the mission was established with units of the 334th Inf. Div. and the 10th Arm. Div.⁽¹⁶⁾, under the command of Col. Weber, commander of the 334th Inf. Div.. The plan called for the initial intervention of the 756th *Gebirgsjaeger* in order to facilitate the entry into the field of the Luder column, who met mechanized units, and give security on the eastern flank. The mountain troops (*Gebirgsjaeger*) would have followed the progression of the column, always keeping to the exposed flank and gradually replaced the occupation of the positions reached by march battalions T-5 and A-25 and the I/92nd Inf., Posted for the occasion Lt. Col. Stoltz to be employed as liaison officer for the army with the Command of *Superga*.

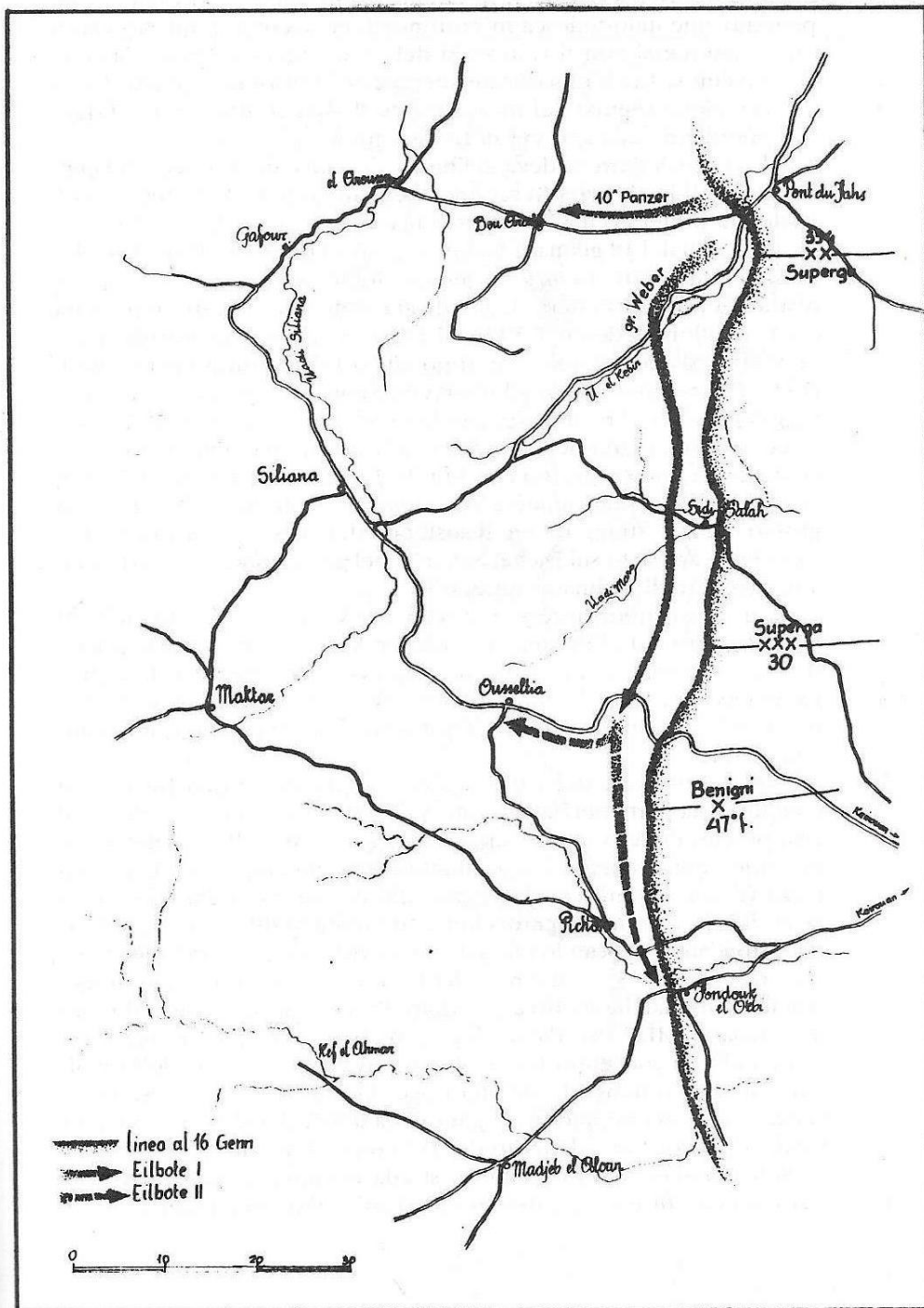
The two German moves, pointed at the Bou Arada and the attack in a southerly direction, started at the same time. We must say that the strong column of Koch⁽¹⁷⁾ soon met the infantry of the British 6th Arm. Div., reinforced by the French Schmeltz grouping. He could not break through and the very hard fight lasted into the following days. However, the attrition inflicted on English will be such as to prevent any aid to Barre.

But these had got wind of the preparations of the axis pointing toward the area of the *wadi* Kebir, but its availability was very limited. The only reserve of Juin was the armored grouping

The plan of operation *Eilbote*

Schizzo n. 35

IL PIANO DELL'OPERAZIONE *EILBOTE*



of Gen. Le Couteulx, and Barre, for his part, could count on a couple of battalions in the second echelon, just enough to cope with local emergencies. But hope could prompt intervention by parts of the nearby British 6th Arm. Div., especially in the case of a German-Italian penetration in depth, and agreements to this effect were entered into with the Command of the British 5th Corp. The action of the Koch column ended such hopes and indeed the impact force and the direction followed by *Kampfgruppe* Weber completed the picture taking Barre and Juin aback.

The sector of Barre saw in the line division of Morocco of Gen. Mathenet. The Kebir basin was assigned to the 3rd Inf. of the *Legion*; further south was deployed the 3rd Moroccan *Tirailleurs* (sketch n. 36).

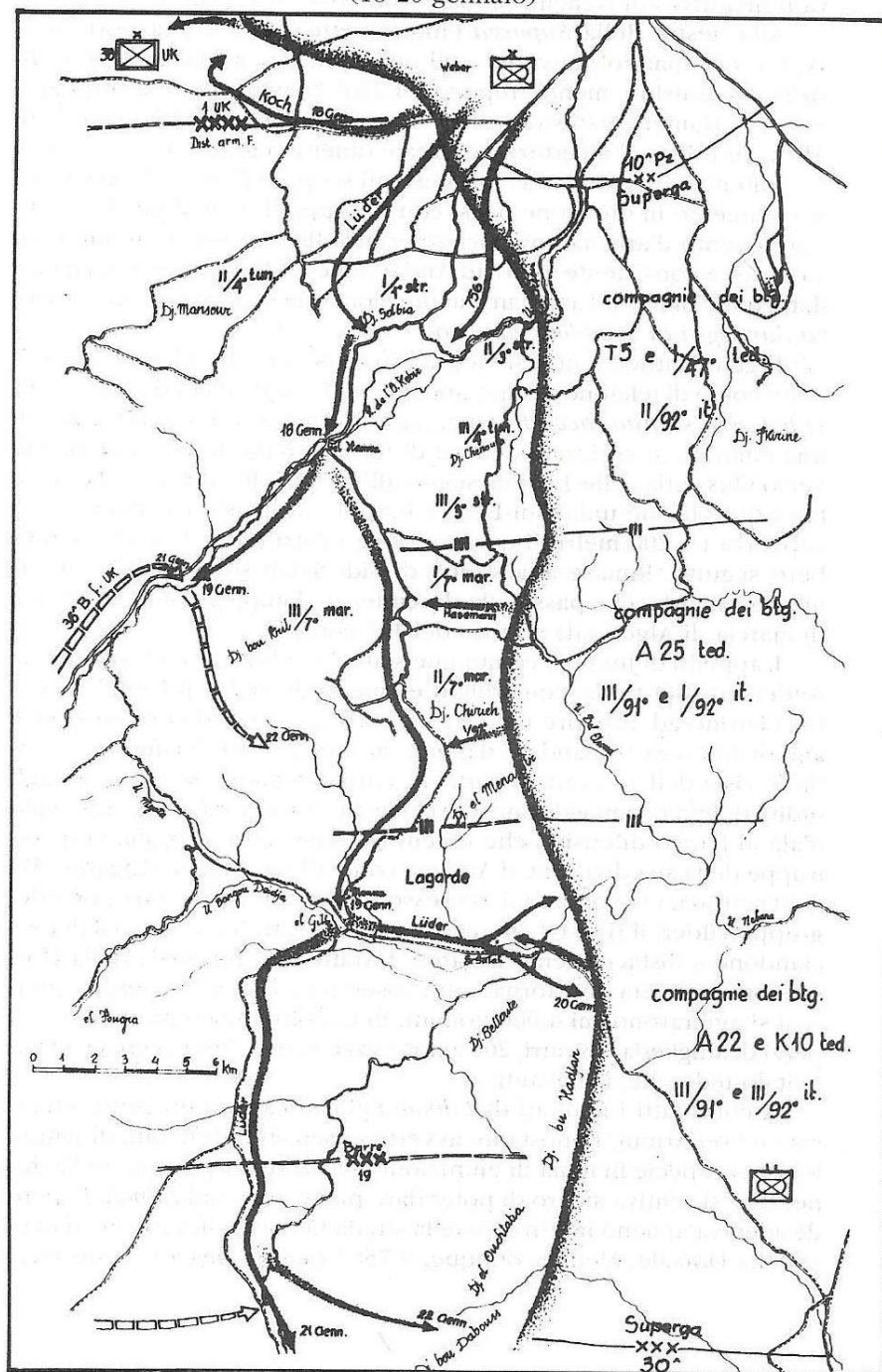
At 05:30 on January 18 Weber attacked on a front of four kilometers with the 756th *Gebirgsjaeger*. The effort was directed against the left side of the II/3rd Inf. foreigner, whose right hand was soon engaged by German T-5 battalion ⁽¹⁸⁾. The resistance of the legionnaires was fierce enough to force the Luder group (501st Armored Group and II/69th *Panzergrenadiere*) to intervene with a short radius encirclement to unlock the situation as soon as possible. The appearance of the German tanks, fifteen *Tiger* and thirty Pzkw III, was decisive and between noon and 14:00 the II/3rd and a part of the I/1st of the *Legion* were virtually surrounded. The counterattack launched by the bulk of the I/1st foreigner with the support of a squadron of *Valentine* was arrested on Djebel Solbia and, within a few hours, forced to retreat in disorder.

The Luder group resumed moving southward at about 16:00 and at 22:00 and came to el Hamra, easily overwhelming the few resistance encountered. The French system was put to the test. Immediately Gen. Mathenet pull together a kind of dike placing the III/3rd foreigner facing north-west, but the worst was yet to come.

In the subsector of the Italian I/92nd, the Hasemann battle-group composed of the A-25 battalion and a company of 190th Arm. Group had, as we know, to facilitate the descent of the Luder group. Except that, instead of waiting for the arrival at his height (which will occur around midnight) at 19:00 already attacked the 7th Moroccan *Tirailleurs*. In an hour the French defenses were smashed causing a sudden tactical crisis. To the north of the rubble the remains of the III/3rd foreigner and 7th *Tirailleurs* they were trying to gather in some way and to avoid encirclement; south remained isolated the II/7th *Tirailleurs*. Gen. Mathenet, whose shortcomings in broadcasting did not allow timely information on the course of events, could do little. It was difficult to navigate, many units were shaken, many artillery already abandoned. Nor was a relief to be expected from the 19th Corp of Koeltz: the I/92nd Inf. of the *Superga* had already blocked the road eventually used for the influx of new French troops on the battlefield.

Conducting *Eilbote* I (18-20 January)

Schizzo n. 36

LO SVOLGIMENTO DI *EILBOTE* I
(18-20 gennaio)

The only attempt to stem the inroads made with little conviction around 09:00 of January 19 by the III/7th Moroccan *Tirailleurs*, already in the second echelon, did not produce good results, although supported by English light tanks. At about that time the group Luder reached the crossroads of Nenchir Moussa, objective of *Eilbote I*.

To the right of the *Superga* the entire sector the T-5 Bn. had brought forward, occupying new and useful positions and fighting behind the II/4th Tunisian *Tirailleurs*, while units of the 756th *Gebirgsjaeger* pushed from El Hamra to the south-west, a move that will help keep Allfrey and Juin in uncertainty on the real German goal.

Juin had not yet understood the aims of *Eilbote*. He feared a breakthrough to the west with a disastrous development for its army detachment, but also for the Allies. Asked, therefore, a prompt and substantial assistance to Anderson and Eisenhower, which will cause the latter to record the impression that the French began "*to show signs of complete collapse*."

Gen. Mathenet had no more illusions. At 11:30 he had given a call to the Lagarde group saying that "*German tanks are cutting the division into pieces*" and warning of an enemy motorized column of a hundred vehicles on their way to Ousseltia. At 14:00, he resigned himself to the inevitable and ordered a retreat all his units on Djebel Bargou, a mountain whose peak was over 1,200 meters above sea level and where the German tanks could not have followed. Remaining close to Sidi Salah only the Lagarde detachment, who passed under the employment of the division di marcia of Algiers, left wing of the 19th Corp.

The appeal Juin was however picked up by Eisenhower and by Anderson. Late afternoon elements of the English 36th Inf. Bd. began to appear in sector of Barre and the American *Combat Command B* (now commanded by Gen. Robinett)⁽¹⁹⁾, transferred to Sbeitla for the establishment of the US 2nd Corp, was placed under the command of Juin and immediately called to the north to give support to the wing on the defensive flank of Gen. Deligne was preparing troops of his division of Algiers and with Lagarde detachment. But the morning of the 20th, consolidated ownership of Henchir Moussa by the Luder group, the III/91st Inf. attacked and took hold of Sidi Salah expelling the Lagarde detachment. The northern section of the Eastern Dorsale was well back in the possession of the Axis. The French losses numbered about 4,000 men, of whom more than 3,000 prisoners, 70 artillery pieces, 13 tanks, 200 vehicles and more material. Those German-Italian, were unimportant.

On balance the results of *Eilbote I* justify some optimism and von Arnim, although warned sensitive logistical difficulties, especially in terms of ammunition, decided to continue the action. He did not feel safe to be able to give full course to *Eilbote II*, but wanted to at least interrupt the road Ousseltia Kairouan-west of the Dorsale. While, therefore, the 756th *Gebirgsjaeger* concentrated

west of Sidi Salah, the Luder group resumed motion. In Sousse sector, units of Gen. Benigni had to move up to the ridge line when it was revealed the German presence (sketch n. 37).

Strongly urged by Gen. Koeltz to block at all costs enemy progression towards the south, Gen. Deligne established three successive barriers, drawing on its left wing, reinforced with the remnants of the Lagarde detachment and with other units. But the German shock was too violent: on the evening of the 20th the first barrier, the most robust, was overwhelmed; the 21st was the turn of the other two, circumvented at short range.

Increasingly manifest was the worsening situation of the France. Now up to the Sidi Salah Ridge was in the hands of the Axis; south of a narrow stretch you could say still held by the division of Algiers, but in fact it would be more appropriate to speak of "pocket". In general, the area hit by the Weber column occurred a confused ebb toward Ousseltia. *Combat Command B* just arrived moved to intervene with instructions received directly from Juin to move on Ousseltia, so ask yourself in a position to attack the right flank of the German starting from dawn of the 21st.

Obviously Juin expected a relatively fast moving Luder group. But January 21 was a day of adjustment: the *Superga* settled on the ridge in the northern and central sections of his sector, as it tried to eliminate the last resistance in the southern hemisphere; the 756th *Gebirgsjaeger* intended to get rid of the pocket to the southwest of the pass of Sidi Salah; Luder had received a reinforcement battalion of the 756th mountain.

All this Koeltz could even imagine, but his supreme concern was just watching the Germans in the Pichon-Nejjarin Okbi, where *Combat Command A* and *B* should have set off on January 22 in the direction of Kairouan. Now, the group B is located in close proximity to Ousseltia, waiting for an order that did not arrive, and the group A was just approaching Sbeitla. Of course, given the circumstances, the action of Kairouan was canceled.

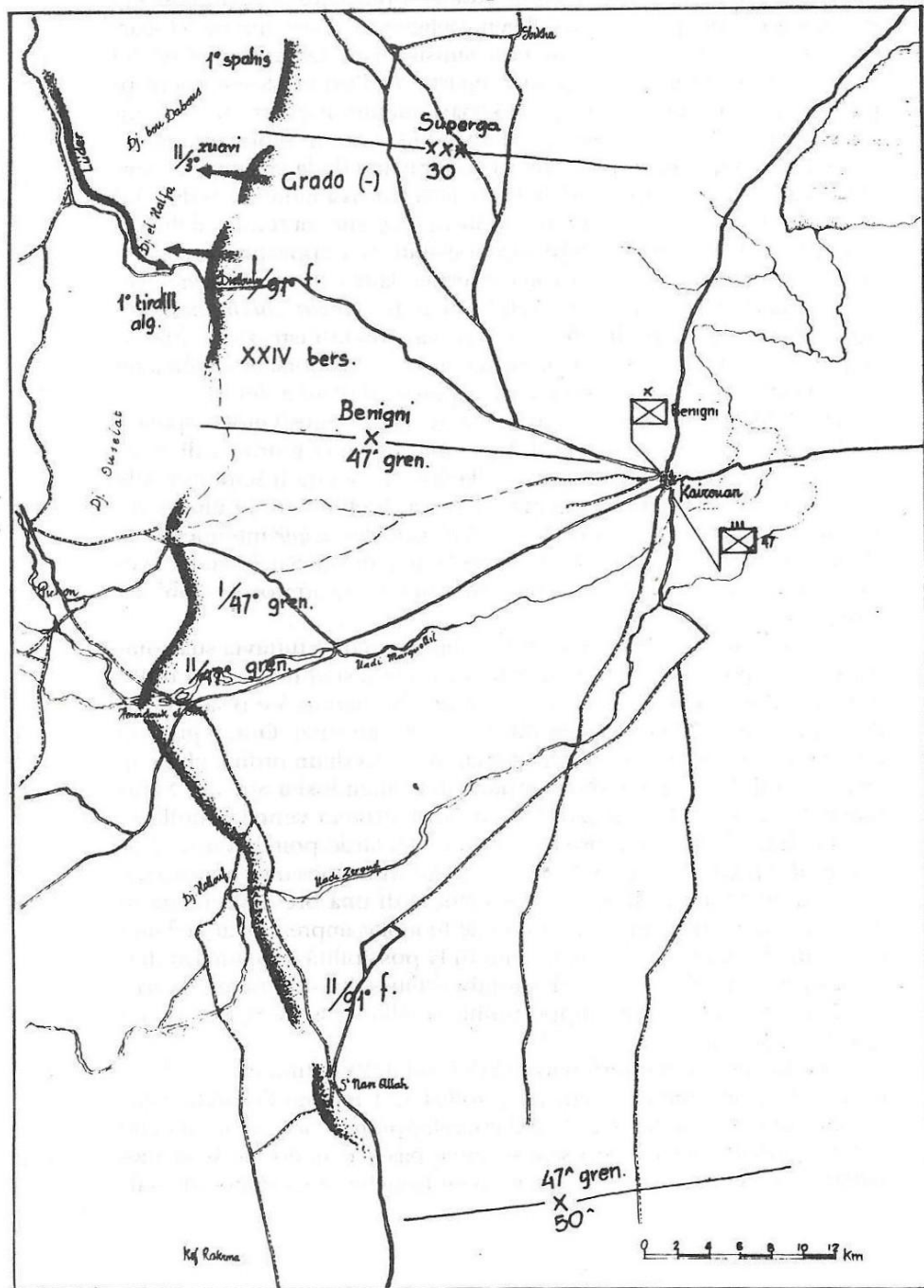
Eventually, after many discussions, in the late afternoon of 21 January Robinett attacked alone, following a heavy air bombardment on the Germanic positions and a short artillery preparation. The Luder group was not very impressed and the only result achieved by the Americans was the possibility of recovery of the French troops to the north of the Ousseltia-Kairouan roadway. Realizing, in fact, such opportunities that evening Koeltz decided to do so.

When there is interference outside the natural line of command, things are bound to get complicated. The intent of Koeltz was immediately nullified by the contemporary order of Juin that all units are still cling to the ground on the dorsal so as to facilitate a robust dynamic response on Henchir Moussa brought by

Developments of *Eilbote II* (21-23 January)

Schizzo n. 37

GLI SVILUPPI DI *EILBOTE II*
(21-23 gennaio)



the British 36th Inf. Bd., with the remaining Moroccan units, from the northwest and from *Combat Command B* from the southwest. Except that the plan of Juin not seem to have found a welcome at Eisenhower and Anderson and everything was reduced to the duplication of efforts of the *Combat Command B* on days 22nd and 23rd.

Now they were in action also battalions of Benigni. The *Grado* battalion and XXIV/5th Bersaglieri, in the late afternoon of the 21st and on the morning of the 22nd, was well opposed by the II/3rd *Zouaves* and part of the *Spahis* and made arduous by the characteristics of the soil. But the drawback heard derived from the shortcomings of the radio link. Given the trend of the struggle, Benigni finally decided to intervene with the I/91st Inf. and on January 23 he saw the achievement of the objectives set and the *Grado* and the I/91st Inf., while the XXIV/5th Bersaglieri failed to oust its opponent from the doggedly defended positions.

On the afternoon of the 23rd von Arnim recognized the opportunity to stop *Eilbote II*. He could not hope more gain and indeed the Allies were rushing in reinforcements. So he ordered the return of the Weber *Kampfgruppe* to friendly lines, passing through Kairouan, and its subsequent dissolution⁽²⁰⁾.

On the evening of the 24th the deployment of the *Superga*, from the north, he saw in succession the following units: battalions T-5 and A-5 German, I/92nd Inf., A-22, A-26 and III/91st Inf.. Three days later it will be reconstituted the III/92nd Inf. and immediately inserted between the Germanic T-5 and A-5 (sketch n. 38).

During these events, Eisenhower had left January 15 for Casablanca where he was to begin high-level conference, referred to below. At that he exhibited the features of *Satin* to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Gen. Alan Brooke was not at all enthusiastic given the chance of counterattacks from the north and south, which was the need to get into an adventure so risky? Even Alexander, who attended the conference, confirmed the inappropriateness of such an initiative. The British 8th army would arrive in Tripoli probably before the end of the month, coinciding with the beginning of *Satin*, but Montgomery could also be temporarily stopped, if only from the difficulty of supplies. As for Rommel, it could be reasonably believed that there remained sixty tanks and 20,000 Germans efficient and 30,000 Germans and many Italians whose fighting capacity was difficult to make judgments. Anyway, hope to see arriving in Tunisia a Italian-German army in pieces it seemed entirely without foundation. Ultimately, the chances were that the episode of Sfax he was struggling with the terrible counterattacks of von Arnim and Rommel from north to south. Might as well put off to a later date the operation, so as to rely on aid of the 8th Army.

Eisenhower perhaps harbored some uncertainty of his own⁽²¹⁾. The fact is that he was convinced right away and returned to Algiers, on January 18 summoned

Schizzo n. 38

[illegible]

the principle commanders to report. They announced that the operations to be carried out in central Tunisia had simply limited to acting "against the Tunis-Tripoli communications for the preparation of a general offensive that would take place in mid-March." Also he pointed out that the attitude on the right side of the front must pursue the defensive and that, as far as possible, it was necessary to save the US 2nd Corp (and especially the 1st Arm. Div.) As mobile reserve. Essentially, he encouraged small tactical actions, provided they do not compromise the balance of the situation.

If conducting *Eilbote* had no impact on the viability of *Satin*, brought instead a radical change on the command. The French reverse was causing separate interventions by units of the British and Americans to close the gaps and demanded the abandonment of the national reins directly from the Allied Supreme Command. So on Jan. 21 Eisenhower ordered all troops in the employ of the line would pass to Gen. Anderson. The detachments of the French army were disbanded and the soldiers of the Tunisians of Gen. Barre had to gather in the area of Constantine. Thus, the British 1st Army would be composed of the British 5th Corp, the French 19th and American 2nd. Juin, who was returning to Algiers to take command of all French land forces in North Africa, Giraud and raised no objections.

As he looked over the concrete steps for the implementation order mentioned, Gen. Koeltz tried to pick up at least some of the lost positions, taking advantage of the American reinforcements received: the 26th *Combat Team* and *Combat Command B*.

But the Axis looked at the situation with some concern. Surely the task of *Eilbote* had caused a serious shock within French and cheaply gained control of much of Eastern Dorsal, especially the Dorsal passes of Sidi Salah and Djeloula represented a concrete and significant advantage. But it was not decisive values. On the one hand the scarcity of troops prevented the realization of a position of resistance of reassuring stability; on the other it was assumed that the focus of Eisenhower would be fixed on the central Tunisia. And he could well see it as any act intended to strengthen the southern flank of the ally could be the introduction of dangerous developments towards Kairouan and Sfax. It would have been dangerous illusion, thought von Arnim, who long escaped the opportunity to cut the supply lines for the army of Rommel.

The unknown, the Italian XXX Corps, concerned the presumed reaction of opponents, who were having collected substantial armored forces in the Ousseltia. Gen. Benigni had deployed all battalion -the *Grado*, the I/91st Inf. and XXIV/5th Bersaglieri -in a semicircle defensive protection holding Djeloula, the nerve center. On the morning of the 25th the American 26th *Combat Team* attacked

Djebel er Rihana, the center of Italian sector, defended by the I/92nd Inf. The fight went on for the entire daytime span, but in the end the pressure proved unsustainable, even for the imbalance in the act of artillery. Under cover of night, therefore, the I/92nd Inf. He had to fall back on the line of hills behind them: the Djebel el Halfa (sketch n. 39).

The move forced to retreat Benigni also the *Grado* and XXIV/5th Bersaglieri, but at night things got complicated even more. At 6 am the following day Benigni phoned Sogno: no news of I/91st Inf. and the *Grado*,. recovered two pieces of the LXV group and semoventi battery of the DCVII group; reserve use of the T assault battalion, just landed from Italy; likely to attack the armored enemy towards the pass.

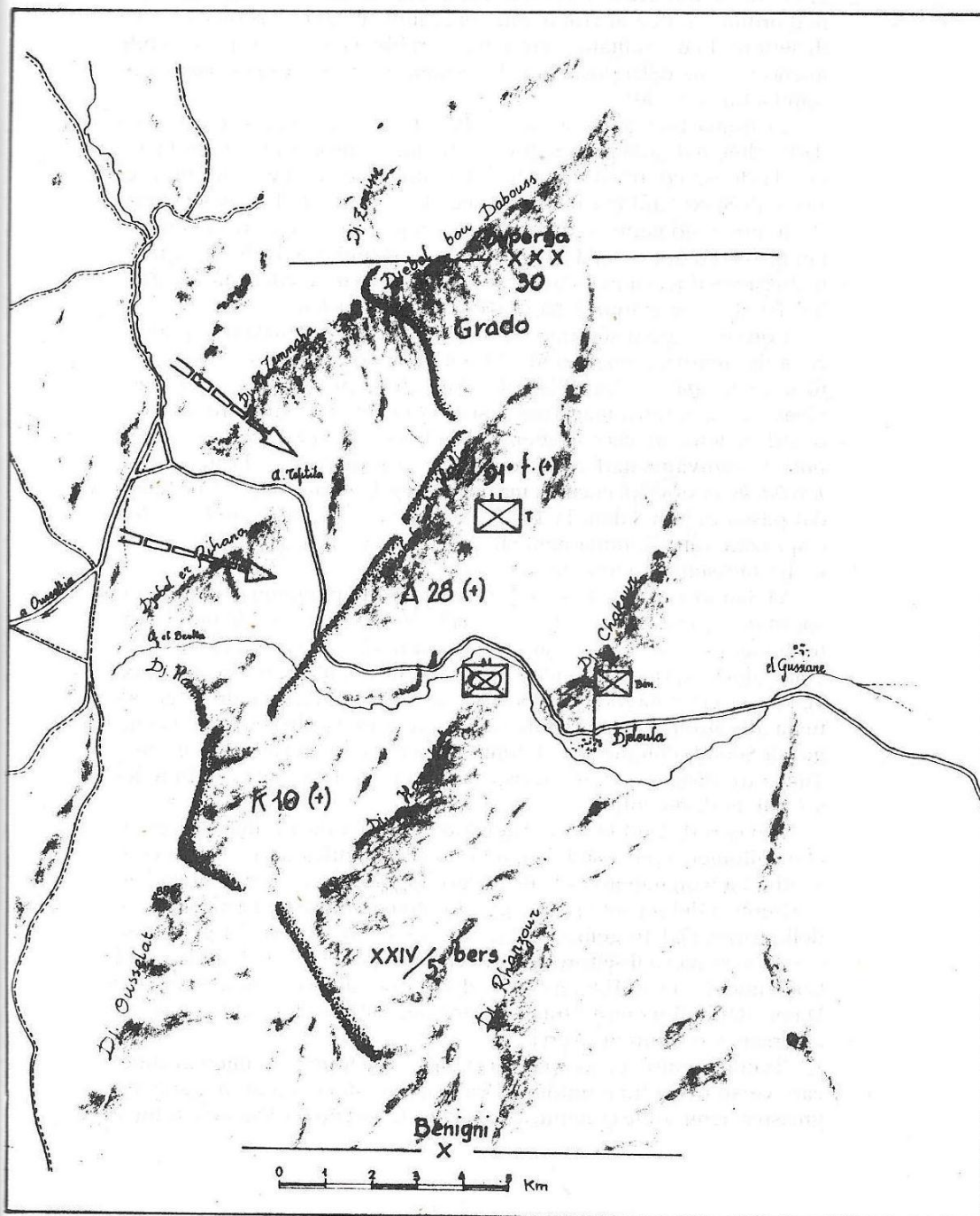
News seized by surprise the commander of the corps, which was suddenly facing a crisis far greater than he had imagined. He rushed to the Tactical Command of Benigni and indeed the picture appeared in a dubious light. Except *Grado*, well anchored to the ground, the rest of the field had been forced to retreat but most dangerously of positions without valid tactic. The I/91st Inf. It was located on the eastern slopes of the Djebel Hannikat though his left, folded because too much "air", was the best settling on land that certainly offered little footholds.

Sogno reiterated the order to defend to the bitter end and asked the reconquest of Djebel el Halfa by the T battalion and the I/92nd Inf. At sunset, the two battalions left the starting points and at 19:00 the action ended happily without much difficulty and with the recovery of part of the LXV group artillery howitzers.

Meanwhile they arrived new units. The LXX motorized machine gun battalion and LVIII/29th artillery grouping of 105/22 on the orders of the same XXX Corps Command, and the German Kleeberg group formed with the battalions A-28 and K-10, on the instructions of the army. He was beginning to breathe and think of a more substantial improvement of the position of strength. Sogno was to indicate the main lines of the operation. The T assault battalion, reinforced, had to reach the Djebel er Zemmaha to ensure the pass of Ain Tefifila; the Kleeberg group had the task of winning the pas of Ain el Berka, occupying Djebel er Rihana and, with the assistance of the XXV/5th Bersaglieri, Djebel Hammara. As for the remaining units, the *Grado* must ensure the right, taking on Djebel Bou Dabouss; the I/91st Inf. keep in the second echelon behind the T assault battalion; the LXX motorized machine gun give security on the left and keep hold of Djeloula. The start was scheduled for the early hours of the 28th. Bad luck would have it, the other side would take the initiative with contrary moves. The comparison that resulted quickly spread to the entire sector Benigni however, how hard were committed by both sides during the 28th and 29th January, did not lead to substantial changes in the situation: the pass of Djeloula remained in Italian ownership.

The situation in Benigni Jan. 30

LA SITUAZIONE NEL SETTORE BENIGNI AL 30 GENNAIO



The last days of the month saw a new attempt of the 5th Armored Army to reach a reassuring structure on the bottom of the Eastern Dorsal, between the pass of Djeloula and to Faïd. It was not a maneuver in a big way, which was not included in the order of ideas of von Arnim, but rather a series of sectoral actions whose end result would allow a significant improvement in the position of strength without running excessive risks (sketch n. 40).

The first move was assigned to the 21st *Panzerdivision* and stemmed from the order of the Comando Supremo to take over Faïd to facilitate defense against the expected and feared US attack in the direction of Sfax. Faïd was the only outlet to the east of the ridge was held by the enemy, so its importance was evident. Moreover, the task of the 21st *Panzer* was not limited to this achievement: the division was to continue up to ensure control of the Djebel Touila, fifty kilometers to the north.

With a slight displacement of the times it was scheduled to depart the renewed operation *Eilbote* II, still entrusted to the reconstituted *Kampfgruppe* Weber. Compared to the previous attempt this version had more breath and hoped to get even the domain of the mouth of the narrow western Sidi Salah. For *Eilbote* II there was complete information and followed with the operation *Kuckucksei* ('cuckoo's egg', but also 'gift unpleasant'): moving from pass to Sidi Salah, the 10th *Panzer* had to reach Ousseltia and sweep all enemy units existing in the West Dorsal, between Ousseltia and Fondouk.

Let's see the details, starting from the operation Faïd. The dispositions - for it were - assumed by the 50th special brigade to control the vast area assigned to it, included the garrisons of Krechem and Maknassy respectively on the Sbeitla-Sfax and Gafsa-Sfax roadways. Maknassy was covered by an advanced post at Sened station, located at the far left of the brigade and a short distance from the village of Sened, including in the neighboring area of the *Centauro* Arm. Div. All three detachments consisted of a modest Italian-German tactical grouping.

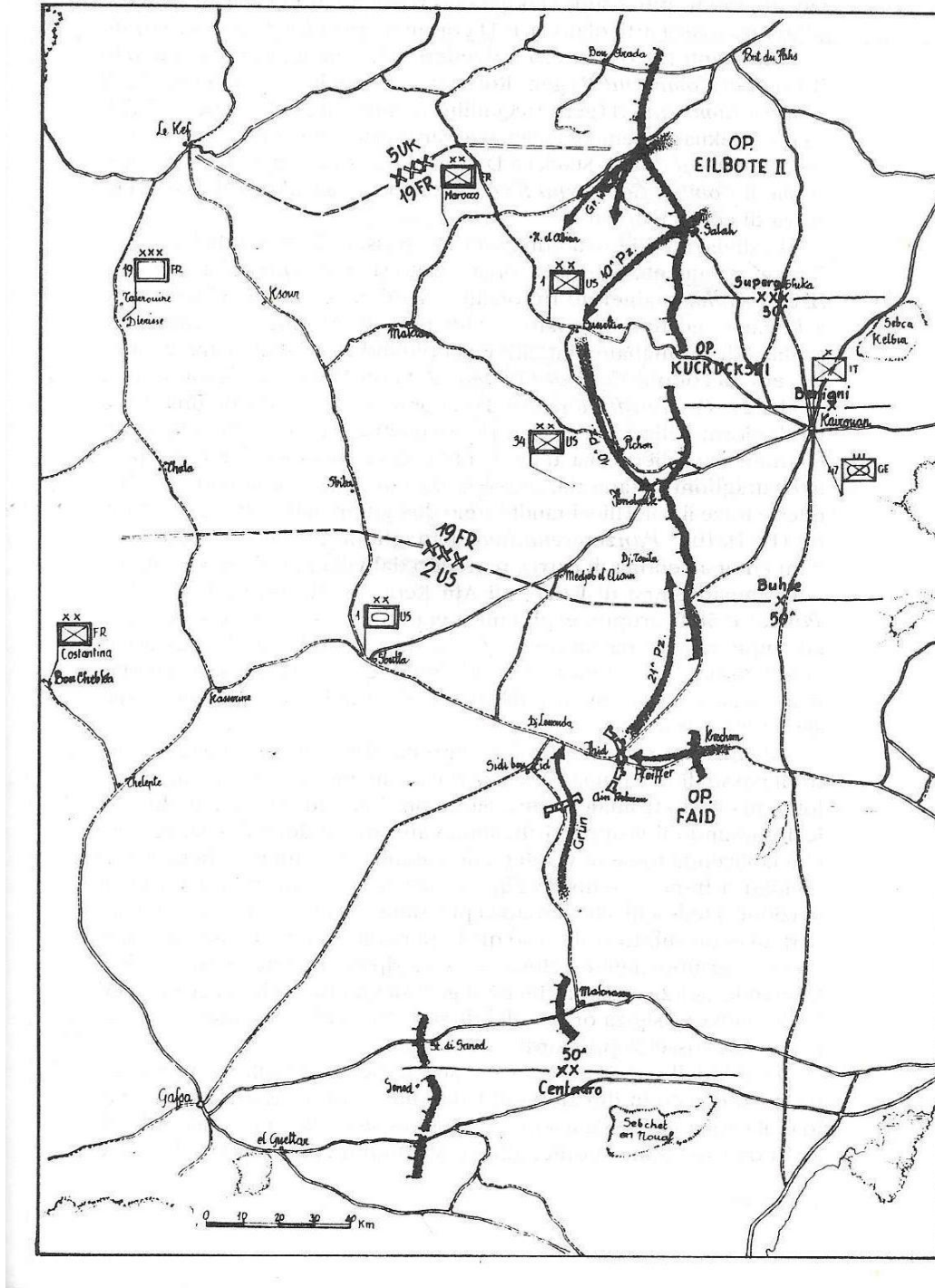
The pass of Faïd they made a system with that of Ain Rebaou, a few kilometers further south, the importance of which was derived from the tactical envelopment of Faïd at short range. The ally deployment resented the recent reshuffle made in the joint forces. From 16 January, the Division of Constantine of Gen. Welvert, that held the sector, was passed in the employ of use to the control of the U.S. 2nd Corp, which, of their own, held in the area only the 1st Arm. Div.. So while the French held their defensive positions, the Americans were in reserve.

Given the task received - prevent the enemy to unblock the west between Fondouk and Maknassy and, at the same time, act aggressively on the Italian-German communications between Sousse and Gabes,

The actions of the Italian-German late January

Schizzo n. 40

LE AZIONI ITALO-TEDESCHE DI FINE GENNAIO



Fredendall had initially thought to act simultaneously in three directions with the 1st Arm. Div. A first goal, to conquer together with units of the French 19th Corp, was Fondouk. The other two were much further south: Maknassy and the threshold of El Guettar. Consequently he had articulated the 1st Arm. Div. into four *Combat Commands*.

The events forced him to reconsider this approach and, when *Combat Command B* (Gen. Robinett) was sent to Ousseltia, *Combat Command A* (Gen. McQuillin) took his place in Sbeitla and the attack on Maknassy temporarily postponed. It was reserved for *Combat Command C* (Col. Stack) and D (Col. Maraist). Then returned to Ousseltia, *Combat Command B* was relocated south of Tebessa, in the corps reserve.

The division of Constantine kept the passes of Faïd and Rebaou with the Schwartz group, organized on two advanced cornerstones (the II/2nd Algerian *Tirailleurs* reinforced in Faïd and I/3rd *Zouaves* reinforced Rebaou) and one rearward, in Sidi Bou Zid. Overall it was a thousand men, but further back, in the plain of Sbeitla, had collected *Combat Command A* with 108 *Sherman* tanks ⁽²²⁾.

The 21st *Panzerdivision* (Col. Hildebrandt) was some ten days in the Sfax to replenish with new tanks and new artillery, but at the moment he could count on only four infantry battalions, one and a half tank and seven batteries. With these forces Col. Hildebrandt formed two battle groups. The Pfeiffer group (I and II/104th *Panzergranadiere*, T-2 battalion, some Italian troops and twenty tanks), from the village of Krechem, must capture of Faïd and Ain Rebaou. Grun Group (I/5th *Panzer* and 580th Recon. Bn.) was assigned a wide ranging movement: from passing Maizila pass on the Maknassy-Sidi Bou Zid road, was to bring in Sidi Bou Zid and then be ready to move to the west of Faïd blocking any attempt of enemy reaction (sketch n. 41).

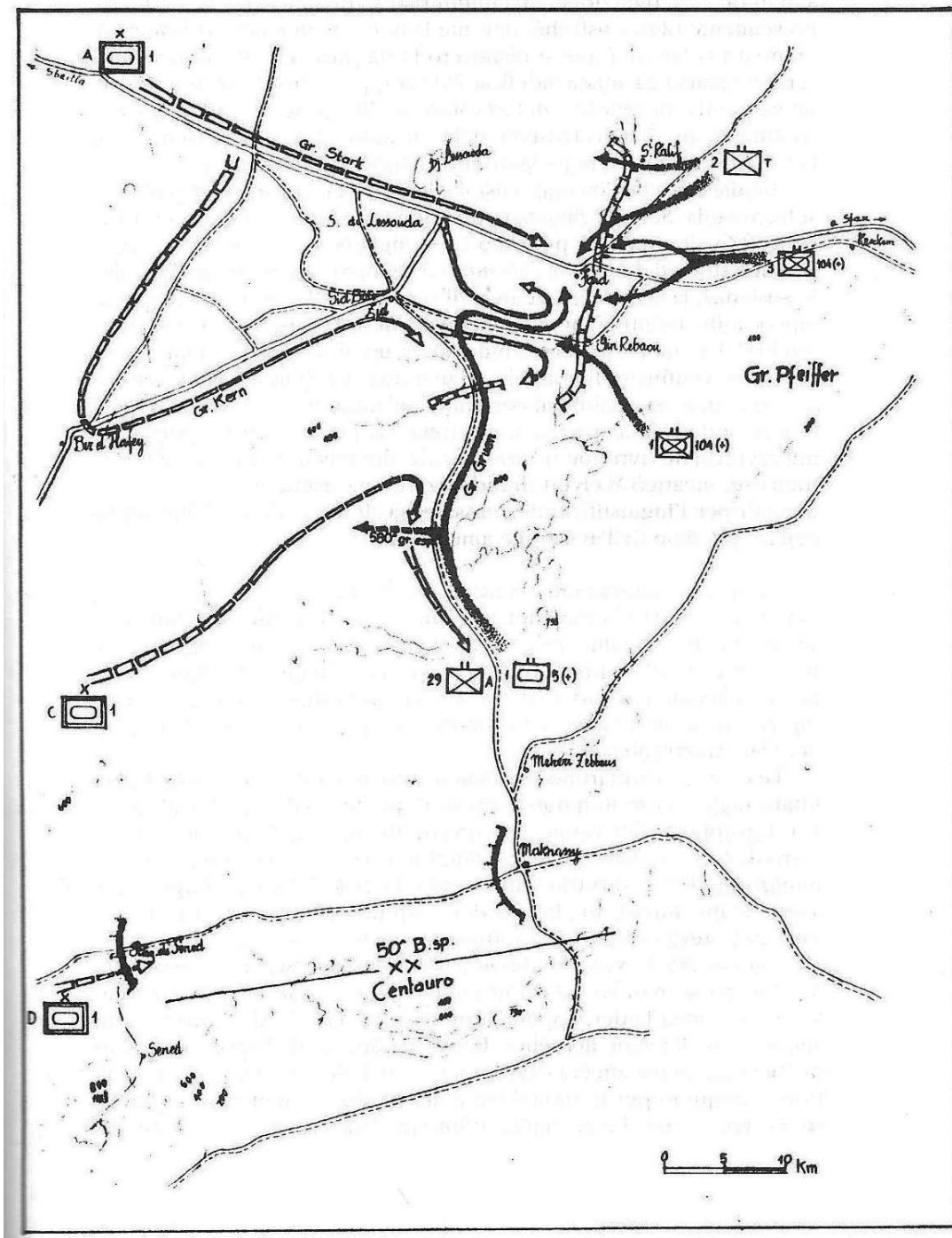
At the dawn of the 30th, therefore, the Pfeiffer group attacked. The move against the pass of Rebaou ended positively after a few hours of fighting, but the frontal impact against Faïd failed to get much. At 13:00, when the group emerged behind the Grun defense, it seemed that the story was in the process of easy resolution. However, although surrounded, the French stood firm and, as they controlled the situation, the Germans eased the pressure. Meanwhile Gen. Welvert, having quickly realized what danger was gathering on the fate of the Schwartz grouping had repeatedly emphasized with the command of 2nd Corp so that the Gen. McQuillin -who had refused to move without orders of superiors - enter in action before it was too late.

Fredendall decided around 09:30 and told McQuillin to prepare a counterattack in the direction of Faïd, but without weakening the control of the area of Sbeitla and especially the possession of the town. In light of this strange order, at 10:00 McQuillin began with ordering

The fighting of Faïd and of. Sened (January 30-February 3)

Schizzo n. 41

I COMBATTIMENTI DI FAID E DI SENED
(30 gennaio-3 febbraio)



a recon company to see what was happening in Faïd. A little later, he sent a small tactical group (a tank company, an armored infantry and a battery) to Sidi Bou Zid, but with a long detour on a secondary road. At 14:00 known to the results of the survey, McQuillin resolved to attack ... but the next day⁽²³⁾. Order so, at night, the two teams that were the forces articulated put themselves one in the Djebel Lessouda (Stark group) and the other in Sidi Bou Zid (Kern group). Onset of action was set for 07:00 of the 31st: Stark toward Faïd, Kern towards Ain Rebaou. Gen. Truscott, Eisenhower advanced Commander, reached McQuillin to closely monitor the fighting.

Needless to say, the incomprehensible American slowness could not solve anything. Under the renewed German pressure the French resistance faded more and more, up to become extinct in the early afternoon, and the two efforts of *Combat Command A* were repelled without difficulty. In essence, the evening of 31 January, the German appeared unequivocal success. In fact, a new US effort exerted in the afternoon of 1 February will end with another setback with the loss of a hundred men and a dozen armored vehicles.

Giraud, made immediately aware of the incident, did not know or wanted to hide his irritation, however, to avoid a personal intervention that would increase the size of the French discontent. Welvert commissioned to direct a resentful protest to Fredendall for the unjustifiable laxity of McQuillin and the ineffectiveness of American aviation and artillery.

Now let us go further north. Col. Weber had twenty-four hours of time, that is, the day of 31 January, to launch and complete his *Eilbote II*, of course with the help of the troops of the *Superga*. His maneuver design rested on the upgrading of Djebel Bargou with the Luder column (II/69th *Panzergrenadiere* and 501st unit of *Tigers*) and driven to the south, to the east of the aforesaid Djebel Bargou, the 756th *Gebirgsjaeger*.

Things did not go exactly as hoped. The *Gebirgsjaeger* indeed reached easily accessing the crossroads of Hanchir Moussa, but the Luder group was soon arrested by antitank guns of 6 pounds of the British 36th Inf. Bd. However, although the elimination of the opponent from the area west of Djebel Bargou had not taken place, the outlet from the pass of Sidi Salah for the 10th *Panzer* could be regarded as sufficiently guaranteed.

Now it was the turn of the operation *Kuckucksei*. The bulk of the 10th *Panzer* was already met in the Sbitka and was to receive the Ltider column recently ended *Eilbote II*, and the competition, in succession of time, sectors and Buhse Benigni. But the operation was stopped before it began. February 1, von Arnim, already little quiet about the situation in northern Tunisia, acquired the feeling that the feared Allied offensive against Sfax had begun.

To the Command of the 50th special brigade came news of ongoing fighting in the area of Maknassy, but while substantially reassuring, at least for the moment, the information on the enemy seemed to indicate the presence of the entire U.S. 1st Arm. Div., which was not at all reassuring. As if that were not enough, at 14:00 of the 1st Gen. Fischer was the victim of the explosion of two mines on his way to the command the Benigni sector to agree about the upcoming operation. The result was that Gen. Sogno, moved in the evening to the Command of the 47th *Panzergranadiere*, where he learned from Lt. Col. Buhse *Kuckucksei* that had been canceled. It only remained to strengthen the positions they occupied.

In the zone of Maknassy the alarm was started on January 30, when in front of the Sened station had appeared enemy recon elements. The town was garrisoned by the II/92nd Inf. (Less two companies) with a company of the 10th Bersaglieri, a machine-gun of the border guard, a battery 75/27 without tractors, as well as from the XV/31st and the German 334th Tank group's recon. The increased size of the garrison (at the expense of Maknassy) compared to a few days before it was due to a sudden American thrust that on the 24th, within hours, had overwhelmed the previous detachment on site and forced Gen. Imperiali to a hasty re-occupation⁽²⁴⁾.

The US initiative stemmed from the decision of Fredendall to seize Maknassy with what was left of the 1st Arm. Div., That is to say with the *Combat Command C* (Col. Stack) and *Combat Command D* (Col. Maraist). Of course he could not imagin to be anticipated by the 21st *Panzer* in Faïd. The first effect of the unexpected German move in Faïd was doubt whether to send even the *Combat Command C* in reinforcement to the defenders of Faïd or whether to keep it for Maknassy. Giraud and Welvert obviously urged that Col. Stack was addressed as soon as possible to Ain Rebaou. Thus, at 13:00 of January 30, Col. Stack was ordered by telephone to hit directly on the enemy side in Sidi Bou Zid (it was the case of the Pfeiffer group) and also to attack any unit that Maknassy to point to at Sidi Bou Zid (it was the case of the Grtin group). Except that at 16:00 the next day, when it was located a short distance from Faïd, came the countermand of the 2nd Corp, turn south and contribute to the effort of *Combat Command D* on Maknassy.

The sudden change of course came from an appreciation of the situation in Faïd absolutely wrong but, as Welvert trying to oppose and to persuade the commander of the 1st Arm. Div., Gen. Ward abided by the provisions of Fredendall. However, even to Maknassy the American intent failed. *Combat Command D*⁽²⁵⁾ had left Gafsa on the morning of the 31st and soon was stumbled upon repeated incursions of *Stuka*, which caused damage and caused, it seems, a certain disorder. The fact is that at 17:30, after a couple of fights and probably unrelated conducted without much conviction, the action was suspended pending the rest of the group, lagging behind.

Imperiali was satisfied and could ensure Sogno of having given the enemy his first failure. A second, but Imperiali could not know, what was going to happen: in the night on 1 February, The II/168th Inf. and the American 175th field group showed up on the battlefield, except that, for heading error and uncertainty of command came to be to the rear of the positions held by *Centauro* and scattered.

As is natural, regardless of such problems, the Allies were determined to settle the issue and the dawn of the of 1st the attack of *Combat Command D* resumed. The fight lasted undecided for the whole day, until at 16:00 there was a new fact. The commander of 334th recon group communicated to Lt. Col. Bottiglieri, responsible for the Italian-German defense, had received orders from the command of the 5th Army to "*abandon Sened Station, retire on Maknassy and therein make resistance*". That said, the unit immediately gathered and withdrew. It is easy to imagine the bewilderment and bitterness of the Italian officer: the 334th recon group not only represented, for its armament, the best card against American tanks, but kept just the middle section of the defense.

He had to resign themselves to continue the fight, now too unbalanced, with the remains of the XV tank battalion and the meager infantry at 16.40 the attackers seized the station and Sened ... fortunately stopped. Moreover, the Italian losses were sensitive because for the lack of vehicles sacrificed artillery pieces and much of the dismounted infantry.

It asks to know the background of the incident. On January 31, the Command of the 5th Arm. Army, Informed erroneously - not know by whom - the evacuation of the Sened station by the garrison, and thinking clearly an Allied offensive in style, had ordered the withdrawal of Maknassy, where the command of the 21st *Panzer* would go with his units. The reply of Sogno, which, the situation was unchanged and rejected the enemy, did cancel the order, but a misunderstanding or a misinterpretation by the 334th recon group the execution times compromise the resistance in the contested area⁽²⁶⁾.

On the opposite side there was much impatience that satisfaction. "*It is vitally important to* - Fredendall ordered Col. Maraistnel on the afternoon of 1 February - *that you take your infantry four miles east of the Sened station. You already wasted too much time. I expect you to be on target no later than 10:00 of February 2. Use your tanks and hurry.*" And he warned that the conduct of the operation would be passed to Gen. Porter starting from 18:00 of that same day⁽²⁷⁾.

Meanwhile *Combat Command B* had reported very limited success and at the cost of significant losses, first because hindered by the German 580th Recon group and then blocked north of Maknassy by the German A-29 battalion.

Even at a higher level it emerged some nervousness. Just the morning of 1 February Eisenhower, concerned about the attitude of the central section of the front, he said that it was necessary to gather to Anderson the U.S. 1st Arm. Div., even if this had resulted in a decline of the line on the Eastern Dorsale, the evacuation of Gafsa and the loss of the airport of Thelepta (halfway between Gafsa and Tebessa). Ultimately "*Maknassy if not taken by tonight, the whole division has to be collected and concentrated in a central area*" decided (28).

Anderson does not seem to have given much after this explicit directive. In the night of the 2nd *Combat Command B* was sent to the north-east of Sbeitla to block an alleged initiative of the 10th *Panzer* from Fondouk and the next morning the *Combat Command D* resumed the advance on Maknassy, now defended by *Kampfgruppe* Strempel, quickly formed with the 190th tank battalion, 334th and 580th Recon Bn., and the A-29 battalion in addition to the remains of Leut. Col Bottiglieri. Did they regret it. Two heavy *Stuka* raids, one in the morning on tanks and one in the afternoon on the infantry, as well as a counter-attack by sixteen *Panzers*, caused losses, disorder and confusion. Despite these mishaps, the action was resumed at dawn on 3 February. It was supported in the afternoon by fifteen American B 25 who bombed positions of the Axis in Maknassy and, by mistake, their Sened station. Now Fredendall ordered the retreat of Gafsa.

Meanwhile von Arnim had carried out some changes in the organization of the sector defense, passing the 50th special brigade employed by the 21st *Panzer* (although commanded by a colonel) and this under the command of XXX Corps.

Basically the actions that took place between January 30 and February 3 were resolved in a stalemate from the other side and with the conquest of the pass of Faid by the Axis. The actual importance of this local success for any future operations did not appear, however, still clear in the minds of some.

3. THE MILITARY-POLITICAL SITUATION

The winter 1942-43 had been opened under the auspices of the worst for the Axis. The Tunisian campaign, faced with more trouble than speed, had temporarily stopped the allied thrust towards Tunis and Bizerte only thanks to the error committed by the Anglo-Americans to land insufficient forces to the east of Algiers. It was clear, however, to be concerned only postponed. Regardless of the original measure - that a cold analysis of the situation, promptly made without uncertainty and optimism in the wrong place by the Italian and without the stubborn refusal to believe the next invasion of French North Africa on the German side, he could make more organic and effective –, conditional

on the need to intervene in any way, it made essential a decision of supreme strategic importance.

It was necessary, that is, whether to assign the beachhead the purpose of allowing within a few months (ie before the excessive strengthening of the allied troops) the recovery of the army of Rommel and his transport to Sicily, or if overseas resist as long as possible to delay the landing in Europe on the open Italian-Greek front. It was not mentioned neither the one nor the other purpose. "The confusion of ideas - said the Gen. Faldella - and instability of purpose meant that they finished to *resist to resist*, with results significantly negative: the Italian-German army was lost and were annihilated the forces landed in Tunisia; sea and air forces suffered an attrition definitive precious materials were consumed and the surviving merchant fleet was lost, unable to delay the assault Europe appreciably" ⁽²⁹⁾.

The aforementioned conference on 18-19 December in Rastenburg, which Ciano and Cavallero were presented with the precise directive of Mussolini to suggest without much paraphrase the escape of a separate peace with the Soviet Union to recover for the benefit of the troops fighting in Africa in the Balkans and perhaps even in the West, allowed simply to note the German stiffening. Or to be exact, to make even more clear the abyss to which we approached.

Cavallero in his diary let fly on the reception received. Ciano showed more explicit, telling how the OKW did not conceal Italians " *the inconvenience of the news of the rout on the Russian front. It tended openly to give us the blame*"⁽³⁰⁾. But a diplomat from the Italian Embassy in Berlin, Michele Lanza, reported much better than the kind of "discomfort". Given that he had seen it coming Ribbentrop, Keitel and others with dark face and in the throes of apparent nervousness, story:

"When, a little later, we reach the party of Ciano in the small wooden house of the Fuhrer, two colleagues they are meeting with their eager faces and haunted eyes. They were literally attacked by the Germans, out of the grace of God, the situation on the Eastern Front. They accuse our soldiers to be escaped, this night, in front of the Russians, endangering the whole situation in the area of Stalingrad. We understand why Ribbentrop and his acolytes seemed so dark, and we understand why the heavy atmosphere that hangs over this meeting"
⁽³¹⁾.

The examination of the events made by Hitler resulted in a rant of discounted platitudes, categorical statements and inferences subjective. In the midst of his ravings, the Fuhrer left no doubt, however, the key point: "*The agreement with Russia is to square the circle: solution impossible.*" There was the question of North Africa. It was at first evasive: "*We must - he said - to consolidate the space won in Tunisia, because this is essential for the subsequent development of efforts.*" Then he did understand, that in the end, the problem was Italian:

"This theater, such as the south-east, is Italian. We give our help. I do not criticize, but only act positively will help with some of our best troops and weapons in order to solve this problem in the common interest.

I want to emphasize in this regard that we have no interest in the Mediterranean, as Italy has no interest in the north or northwest.

My promises are not Platonic; but means positive and effective. The question is in these conversations like Germany can help Italy, also given my cordial friendship for the Duce. Our spheres of interest do not clash, and this is a guarantee for the future (...)" ⁽³²⁾.

Cavallero said, highlighting how, instead, the Mediterranean should not be considered only of Italian interest, but assume critical importance to the effects of the conduct of the war of the Axis. And since there was, he added:

"(...) We can no longer provide for ourselves, before the air power acquired by the enemy.

The support of a strong air mass which takes the triangle Tunis-Sicily-Sardinia is the minimum necessary and urgent, in order to solve the transportation problem, the question for us of life and death. "

The intervention of Goering, who promised to take the specific topic in separate talks between militaries, allowing Hitler to get away with an agreement "in principle" to provide help. In subsequent contacts with Goering and Keitel, however Cavallero became aware that the intervention of the new forces of the *Luftwaffe* would be gradual and insufficient. Ultimately, if the Italian mission had been waiting to get a few hopeful sign, the disappointment could not be greater.

"The military situation on all sectors - Lanza noted under the date of 19 December - It appears serious. Marras explains to Ciano with ruthless precision. His conclusions are all too obvious, and perhaps for this Cavallero looks at him sideways then goes away nervously.

Ciano gives the impression of having lost all the nerves. It does not stand still for a moment; He gets up and sits down; jokes, then darkens; have sudden bursts of laughter, he tries reasoning yarn and ends up cursing. Its refrain is always the same: there is nothing to do, the Germans did not intend reasons, the Germans lost the war.

Suddenly Alfieri has an unexpected burst of energy and speaks with sufficient efficacy of the need to attempt disconnection. Ciano looks at him with tired eyes (apparently already thinking of something else), then it drops these words: "*Nothing, nothing! You just have to wait for the collapse*" ⁽³³⁾.

One final note of Lanza, during the journey back to Berlin, "Cavallero shows, as always, calm and optimistic. But in his room all looked worried and grim. I read this sentence: "*Now does not show up any more glimmer of light*"" ⁽³⁴⁾.

In January 1943, the Italian situation was serious, very serious. The events in Russia and Africa were engraved painfully on

the best divisions. The remaining thirty were in the Balkans, seven in Provence and Corsica. In Italy were located in four divisions in Sicily, as many in Sardinia and nine in the peninsula. In addition, there were twelve coastal divisions in Italy and two in Corsica. While large units used in the Balkans and France reached a fair degree of efficiency (although undermined by poverty of means of transport and the mediocrity of weaponry), those in Italy showed, generally sensitive to organic character flaws and training.

As for the fleet, the violent incursion of American *Liberators* on Naples of 4 December had put out of action the 7th Cruiser Division, resulting in the loss of the *Attendolo* and serious damage to the *Eugenio di Savoia* and *Montecuccoli*, and led the major units to abandon the central Mediterranean. The three battleships *Roma*, *Vittorio Veneto* and *Littorio* were moved to La Spezia and the 3rd Cruiser Division in La Maddalena. They stayed in Messina, the 8th Cruiser Division in Taranto and the two battleships *Doria* and *Duilio*, in disarmament. The fleets transfer to La Spezia scored the withdrawal from the arena of the most powerful Italian ships, but we must sadly admit that wherever they would have been trapped for lack of oil.

In that desperate fuel crisis emerged the courage of the frogman raiders. The first operation was carried out on December 8 from Algeciras against ships of *Force H* in Gibraltar, but failed and only one of the raiders managed to return to base. The second was made on December 12 by the 10th Light Flotilla against merchant in the port of Algiers, one was sunk and three damaged, however, all sixteen members of the company were captured.

La R. Aeronautica could count on a total of 860 combat-efficient aircraft on an availability of 1,430. Very few⁽³⁵⁾.

Nor can we say that the picture was not foreseeable. Early in September 1942, the Comando Supremo had prepared for the three General Staffs a “program in 1943”. One presented by R. Army tended to achieve four objectives. For its part organized generally aimed at the full efficiency of thirty operating divisions (twenty out of Italy and ten in metropolitan France), framed in a convenient number of large units of a higher order. For materials, he wanted to give the maximum increase in the production of tanks, so as to align four armored divisions in the first half and a fifth of P 40 tanks, by the second half. In this regard it should be recalled that Hitler had allowed Italy the reproduction of the new *Panther* tank, the more modern model, not yet introduced in the German army and for which it was intended to ensure the utmost secrecy to better exploit the surprise at the time of use. Because testing of the P 40 was only in the beginning and the engine had yet to pass a sufficient period of experimentation,

probably would have been a further loss of time before moving on to the final production. This resulted in the opportunity to focus on the P 40 rather than opening a new program. So the *Panther* remained in abeyance.

The third objective was the availability of adequate supplies to the ordinary needs of the thirty operating divisions (consumption calculation made in relation to data from the country of Greece and North Africa). Finally, bring the maximum production capacity of existing plants within a few months, in order to obtain the desired levels of production.

Gen. Favagrossa, undersecretary for Manufactures of war, immediately on receipt of the three programs did present to Mussolini the inability to accommodate requests. In the memo with which explained the sore denial, called attention to certain key factors: the huge increase of raw materials needed compared to the already strenuous assignment of the current year (1942); the futile hope of increasing the domestic production of raw materials, steadily and significantly declining; the need to request increases from Germany, when, just a month before, the German representatives had declared not to be able to ensure supplies even promises for 1942.

On balance, the Army had to settle for patch up the two armored divisions in North Africa. Nothing could be done to improve the conditions of other territorial divisions nor the anti-aircraft defense, and even to ensure the supply of ammunition according to expected use. For the Navy and the Air Force, the major difficulties reflected the aluminum, copper and special steels. Finally, the merchant navy would remain in complete distress. In essence, the document was clear that Favagrossa - to put it - *"if no aid from Germany we would not have been able to deal with the implementation of the program in 1943, without the implementation of it we would not have been able to continue the war."* Regardless of the raw materials Favagrossa formulated reserves fully justified: the air strikes of the last quarter of 1942 and the consequent considerable damage inflicted to large industrial centers of northern Italy (Turin, Milan, Genoa, Savona) caused in fact the inevitable and dreaded sharp decline in many areas of production, worsening the state of affairs. In addition, Germany in late November said they are not in condition to contribute to our program 1943. While, in fact, the operation *Bolero* proceeded, the Allied air forces were subjecting Germany to the systematic destruction of its internal resources with the so-called combined offensive of bombers. Offensive increasingly destructive, especially since it was introduced systematic analysis of industrial organization for the German selection of goals to hit.

Mussolini wanted to make the point and asked Cavallero a revised program and correct, to examine with all stakeholders. The meeting,

preceded by some other partial convocations made by Cavallero, it took place at the palace Venice on January 29 and was attended by twenty-four members of the military and civilians. The difficulty of the moment was felt by everyone. The fall of Tripoli, as expected, had left its mark and had just received news that the Allies had launched in Casablanca a demand of unconditional surrender. Yet Mussolini seemed strangely inclined to play down. On 23 January, the Council of Ministers, expressed the belief that the war would last "*another three or four years*". On the 28th, according to Ciano, showed open confidence in righting the situation in Russia by Germany and also for Tunisia "*sees black*".

Now, opening the meeting, he drew briefly and with deliberate nonchalance the features of the latest events of the war:

"(...) The current situation presents positive and negative aspects. Negative in the sense that the enemy has taken the initiative of operations on the ground, has set foot in North Africa and the initiative to air operations. Positive in the sense that the enemy has not achieved these results by strategic change that. I think this will be contained and overcome"
(36),

then he listened to the recalculation of minimum requirements proposed by the managers of the individual armed forces and merchant marine, as well as the possibilities of Gen. Favagrossa for the production and Scuero for the personnel to arm. Under the circumstances, the 'enhancement' was reduced to the search of the best use of the few available. The reading of the report is enlightening about the complexity and severity of problems. And how they would affect the future and certainly the most repeated Allied bombing on production already so limited? In terms poor could conclude with a: for the first half of 1943 in some way you will pull ahead, then no one can say. It is clear that Italy was really on its last legs, but Mussolini was careful not to draw the consequences.

As it had been decided to not to demand the minimal contribution to the solution of the strategic problem. Yet the scene described by Mussolini himself did not appear comforting, despite the tone of sufficiency: in Greece "*we know they are all against us ... if the British and Americans disembarked all Greeks would make common cause with them*"; in Albania "*the situation is constantly getting worse*"; Montenegro "*is quiet, but not to be trusted because it is not got that in the midst of political agreements*"; in Croatia, "*the situation is confused ... our soldiers have seen horrifying scenes, these people are still at the dawn of a civilized life*"; Slovenia "*until 1 June 1941 ... the relations between us and the Slovenes were friendly enough. Everything has fallen*"; Corsica "*the situation is satisfactory as we are hated everywhere*"; in Provence "*even there they detest, loathe almost like the Germans. A part of the population tries, I think with no great fortune, to incite our soldiers.*" Well, the two agonizing problems to solve, the points on which it imposed with

the definition of the urgency of action to follow, were liquidated in a few words. Tunisia: prevent the enemy exceeding the sixty km existing between his position and the sea to divide the army of von Arnim from that of Rommel. Sicily: it was not certain that door that the Allies could have come to Germany; therefore, they agreed to land in Greece. This said the Duce.

Not worth to point out that, after all, the object of the report concerned the strengthening of the armed forces; that discussions were of paramount importance best seat in a narrower goal, that there were only forty-eight hours to the change at the top. Neither before nor after Mussolini wanted to address the fundamental choice. It seemed to passively accept the concept of "*resisting to resist*" and to find a justification violation of agreements or non-help from Germany.

Known as the ally of unconditional surrender, which united regime and the people, in late January the atmosphere in Germany became very heavy. Goebbels had unleashed a campaign based on the theme "*We have to win; if we lose we're finished*"; campaign that deeply shook the Germans: "*the population - noted one observer in Berlin - seems taken from a paroxysm of fear. All are serious, dark, run the strangest rumors. It is, of course, all curse Italy*" ⁽³⁷⁾.

Should not arouse so much wonder the OKW considered African affairs with a certain distraction. But then news from Rome awoke abruptly attention of Hitler and the German commanders that somehow they were committed in the theater of war in the Mediterranean: the fall of Cavallero.

One conclusion of this phase of the struggle. possible without a few words concerning the calculation of the Mar. Cavallero. The measure was brewing for a couple of months, since the reverse of El Alamein had allowed the increasingly harsh criticism of Chief of Staff General to find growing credit with the Duce ⁽³⁸⁾.

We recall, by way of introduction, which Cavallero took the mandate when the most serious political and strategic errors were committed: the intervention based solely on the belief that Germany had already won the war; the superficial appreciation of the importance of Malta in the problem of supplies overseas; the unrealistic behavior of the "parallel war"; the untimely initiative and chaotic war against Greece.

That said, it must admit that a close examination of the work of Cavallero is not easy. Just because the man was much discussed, it would behoove us to consider the entire cycle of his military activity, from the First World War to the tragic end. But obviously this is not covered

in this essay and, likewise, it would go beyond the limits of discussion when you take into consideration his figure of Chief of Staff General since December 1940, especially as elsewhere, much has been said about him. We will limit, consequently, a few considerations. In favor of Cavallero are the tenacity and willpower with which he strove to create - is the right word - a Comando Supremo to the demands of war and to extend its influence to all sectors of the nation involved in the war. Conversely, it weighs on him, the responsibility of not having fought up to threaten to resign, while having the full support of the General Staffs of armed force, to oppose both the sending of the CSIR to the Russian front, when Libya was found in all its magnitude the problem of shortage of vehicles, and - especially - the decision to transform the CSIR into the 8th Army, when the importance of the theater of war in the Mediterranean to Italy had become vital, and no doubt could no longer subsist on serious shortcomings and weaknesses in the Italian military, economic and industrial.

On the issue of Malta's probably too trusted in the effectiveness of aerial bombardment. He saw right on the alternative Malta-Alexandria, but initially was influenced also by the victorious succession of events in North Africa and persuaded to postpone the operation C 3, and when he continued to insist, after the battle of Alam el Halfa, was too late.

Which brings us to the last period: from El Alamein to Tunisia. What is new, with an immediate result of the defeat, it was the Anglo-American landing in French North Africa. Certainly it was disconcerted and the measures taken did not shine for organic it for timeliness. At first hesitant, he refused for a long time to admit the game lost in Africa. According to a source close to him, after the visit of 18-19 December at the headquarters of the Fuhrer Cavallero had decided to address the issue with decisive strategic intent. Just returned from Rastenburg, he reported the progress of the talks to the Duce and the King (December 23) and that fact would have shown the inability to remain overseas and convenience to withdraw all the forces into Sicily and Sardinia to address each and care attention to the direct defense of the country. The suggestion was rejected as impractical and, especially, politically unwise ⁽³⁹⁾.

That such a thought has crossed the minds of Cavallero and indeed it was revealed a few intimate certainly appears plausible, but that has translated into a formal proposal it seems unreliable because no document to support that version was found. It also seems doubtful that Cavallero would nonetheless advocated to Vittorio Emanuele III, seen at a later time, a strategic solution already rejected by Mussolini. Note that in the diary of the First Adjutant General of the King there is no specific mention, as the argument surely have, will, if touched in the conversation, because it relates to a comment

made on November 14 by his sovereign. That day Vittorio Emanuele III, aware of the seriousness of the situation, had shown to Gen. Puntoni a memo prepared for Mussolini and observed: "Now we must provide for the defense of Italy seriously, focusing as much as possible of forces in the metropolitan area. I do not think it appropriate to comply with the proposal of the Germans who, in the case of landings in Italy, would send 100,000 troops to the peninsula. We must do everything to achieve the return of our units that are located in Russia (...)" ⁽⁴⁰⁾. Instead, on December 26 Cavallero instructed Puntoni to report to the king that, it is impossible to supply the Libyan theater the Comando Supremo decided to evacuate Tripoli to concentrate everything in Tunisia.

Actually, at that point nothing conclusive could be accomplished without considerable Germanic aid. And in front of the Germans it was pretty hard stop dead for the simple reason that the ally was poor, as the poor relation, has little say in the matter, especially when the strong ally is on the arms issue its own amplitude and increasing severity. Gen. Marras, Italian military attaché in Berlin, did not hesitate to warn that Germany was facing a period of acute crisis, she lacked reserves and the soldiers at the Russian front were frayed. For more "*in every corner of Europe is fermented hatred against the Germans and their system of occupation*" ⁽⁴¹⁾.

Regardless of organizational flaws, objectivity wants the recognition of the substantial and dramatic Italian misery. Re-reading the minutes, notes, summaries of interviews, you will come across at each step in the need for German aid. Worse: the only way out of many difficulties is disclosed in the various reinforcements of weapons, vehicles, units and raw materials from Germany. Attitude, this, irritating to the OKW, which hosted the constant stress with a healthy dose of skepticism, impatience and carelessness. That Germany does not absolve the commitments made with Italy is a fact, but it seems excessive to claim that he did just for spite. Undoubtedly it was necessary to combine firmness to diplomacy. Cavallero tried to act in this way, but with questionable results.

Although in his talks with Kesselring we are not ever lack of dignity and even if Kesselring had always manifest consideration and respect for Cavallero, an observer as Col. Dollmann said that relations between the two "*showed the great advantage that the Italian front of the German proved even submissive*" and that Kesselring "*the real head among the other Italian commanders at the time was Roatta, whose keen intelligence, as no scruples, he made him much more impressive*" ⁽⁴²⁾. It's no wonder that the general attitude, some excessiveness stroke or weaknesses Cavallero provoked very harsh judgments by many personalities of the time and even lower ⁽⁴³⁾.

Gen. Faldella, whose pages are probably on the personage of the most balanced, admitted that the widespread opinion of

extreme softness of the Chief of the G.S. General desires and demands found Germanic validation in the opposition and concerns expressed by the Germans for his exemption (44). The most unequivocal response was offered by his German source:

"The replacement of Cavallero with Ambrosio, on 31 January 1943 had brought a significant shock to the Italian-German military cooperation (...). Cavallero had a good, perhaps overly developed adaptability. Convinced of the need for a common conduct of the war, he was always ready to try to carry out the wishes of the OKW, because Italy was, the two participants in the coalition, the weaker militarily and economically.

Under the influence of Mussolini, he had shown on strategic ground acquiescent to German wishes against his deepest conviction, such as the postponement of the conquest of Malta the conduct of the advance to the Nile.

(...) Cavallero did not enjoy suffering. Italians in the military kept a grudge against him for his surrender against OKW and, beyond that, because he had lost all the Italian units on the various theaters of war, Africa, the Balkans, France and Russia, so that for the defense of the Motherland were left with only a few and poorly armed divisions "(45).

Cavallero expressed a strong desire to centralize, with consequent impact both positive and negative. Among the first certainly stands out the intention to tackle the war in every angle, including the economic one. Among the drawbacks we have to mention excessive expenditure of time for discussion of relatively minor problems that could be entrusted to others, and certain positions very subjective. For example, in 1942 he authorized personally von Rintelen in Italy to deploy mobile units and organs of the *Funkabwehr* (defense against clandestine radio), which the SIM had hitherto prohibited tenaciously knowing how it would be used exclusively by the Germans.

Another downside was the intolerance another's independence. This led, as is inevitable, and the falling of men by the firm character and encouraged the presence of a certain conformity. The most convincing example is to be found precisely in his relations with the Chief of Staff Army. The constant and watchful presence of Cavallero in talks of Ambrosio with Mussolini - while the other two Chiefs of the G.S. They could approach the Duce alone, in their capacity as secretaries to the respective armed force - often prevented a frank and open conversation. When, in certain circumstances, Ambrosio did not hesitate to express opinions at odds with him, Cavallero resented openly moved to reprimand. Indeed, its susceptibility was so hurt to bring it in the determination to get rid of so little malleable Chief of Staff. He motioned to the King before leaving for Rastenburg, but Vittorio Emanuele III not shared at all this regard.

Another criticism of strategic conduct sometimes too collimating with personal ambition. Already during the campaign in Greece, although covers the two charges to Chief of the Staff General

and the supreme commander of the armed forces of Albania, he had advanced to Mussolini the proposal to create a third army, central between the 9th and the 11th, which he would assume the command directly, maintaining, well of course, the other two assignments. The idea was so absurd that was immediately rejected by Mussolini. A second incident occurred in North Africa, in August 1942, after being promoted to Marshal of Italy, from which he tried to exclude Bastico⁽⁴⁶⁾. On that occasion, Cavallero *would* take over the leadership of operations to reach the Nile Delta, forming a strange delegation of the Comando Supremo headed by Barbasetti and limiting the powers of the General Government and Bastico to Command of the armed forces of Libya. The change implemented in the organization of command and gave rise to many known drawbacks and it ended as we know.

A third and more confused now he involved the new Tunisian theater. Have a brief while on extensive series of interviews with Kesselring, with Mussolini and Vittorio Emanuele III, it never came to light the true intention of Cavallero about it. In the end, namely at 06:00 on January 26, 1943, he went into operation in the framework of the General Staff of Africa as part of the Comando Supremo with the task of ensuring the uniform conduct of operations of the Italian and German armed forces in North Africa. In other words, he was to provide the supervisor of the G.S. General elements for decisions on the conduct of land operations, air and sea in that theater and provide for the compilation of the directives and consequential orders. They fell within its sphere of work: the reconstitution of large units used in Tunisia, the organization of the broadcasting system, the organization and the functioning of logistics, air and maritime transport from Italy. A chief of the General Staff Africa was the place in Gen. Gandin, assisted by Adm. Girosi as deputy. Col. Westphal, who the German desired would have to take up the post of deputy chief, was named chief of the operations office. The organizational structure to be discussed and probably constituted of uncertainties⁽⁴⁷⁾. The fact is that the staff was not covered immediately and had a temporary startup, so that the date of the constitution of the General Staff Africa to that of dissolution (the end of February, after the entry into operation of Army Group Africa) Gandin had to work with two distinct groups: one Italian, with a dozen officers mostly detached from the departments of the Supreme Command and the SIM, and one German, with ten officers, the head of which was Col. Westphal. The latter group, ultimately, could be considered a General Staff connection of the OBS at the Comando Supremo.

From the reading of the tasks of the General Staff Africa, by specifying that at the same time the German 5th Armored Army spent in the employ of the Comando Supremo and the absence of any mention about the establishment of a regular control of the theater, ie

a group of the army in Tunisia⁽⁴⁸⁾, it can draw the unequivocal conclusion that Cavallero meant to evoke if the direct use of the two armies in Tunisia.

Just 26 January, Kesselring communicated Hitler's thinking:

"(...) The control units of the two armies in Tunisia must be ensured by an army commander. Since the Field Marshal Rommel will be granted sick leave request to restore his health, for this task can be considered only Colonel General von Arnim.

What freedom of action granted to him by the Comando Supremo, or to what extent he should reserve to take the essential decisions concerning the two armies, it is a matter purely operational (then the responsibility of the Comando Supremo)".

Cavallero, reportedly answered generically, concluding:

"It is a problem that must be weighted and then come back in examination"⁽⁴⁹⁾. Rather ambiguous answer, now that it was the final determination. The next day there was a breakthrough. Cavallero informed Kesselring that Mussolini had agreed to entrust to von Arnim command only: Too many local problems to solve, to think of different solutions. Kesselring naturally aroused his consent, however,

"Adds - Cavallero noted -that von Arnim can not provide at the same time his army and the army group. He says the Fuhrer believed that the Comando Supremo wanted him to lead the Army Group. I reply that I have never said this, or maybe I have explained evil are always for logical solutions. Please say that to marshal [sic] Jodl"⁽⁵⁰⁾.

In parallel to this strange attitude on the subject so important, it seems to be taking a physiognomy very different kind of orientation. The undoubted ambition of Cavallero, his attachment to the office revealed by the frequent open desire to please Mussolini, the absurdity of certain events of optimism designed to not lose confidence and the favor of Mussolini - which the statement that *"distant destinations for US are Algeria and Morocco"*⁽⁵¹⁾ -, everything, together with the poor health of Mussolini and the trend of the war, aroused suspicions of political ambitions.

On 27 October 1942, Gen. Puntoni noted in his diary:

"At 17:15 comes to me General Hazon, which informs me that within things go from bad to worse. The disease of the Duce sparked the appetites of the competitors to his succession, some would even put forth by Cavallero to know how you feel and how you would lead if Mussolini were missing or that there be a coup.

Cavallero, as I said Hazon, replied that his attitude would be to suggest that his position as commander of the Armed Forces [sic] and that, as has always faithfully served the Duce, would be willing to serve as the head of government if He was appointed by the king"⁽⁵²⁾.

In November following the marshal ordered Undersecretary Scuero set up for him to do some offices in the headquarters of the Ministry

of War, whose center transmissions allow the direct connection with the increased level of controls in the peninsula and in the occupied territories. He was preparing to stand as arbiter of the situation? On November 26 Scuro met with Puntoni and the conversation turned naturally on the gravity of the internal situation and the fact that the disease of the Duce had "*put in the agitation of alleged successors, who gave vent to all their repressed ambitions*". In fact, the health of Mussolini was worsening, with obvious repercussions on his volitional faculties. They surfaced manifestations of sluggishness and senility alternating with obstinate and angry statements. This explains how Scuro claimed in no uncertain terms that he was spreading the feeling that the rudder was no longer in firm hands and that "*many expect a resolute gesture of the King*"⁽⁵³⁾.

Carlo Cavallero also touched on it:

"Although it has flatly refused, in the last days of his command, to accept the German suggestion intended to induce him to in fact replace Mussolini in the direction of the war, but my father was convinced that it was necessary:

1. Give back to the King the actual command of the Armed Forces (...);
2. Ask the Germans forces necessary to defend the soil of the homeland.

If these forces were not granted, agree with the Ally for an organic release, such that we can use all our chances again in our hands to deal with the enemy in our return to neutrality (...)"⁽⁵⁴⁾.

And according to this source, Cavallero "*had no thoughts of replacing Mussolini*", but thought it possible that they would remain at the head of "*a coalition government similar to the one that had started the fascist regime*"⁽⁵⁵⁾. If this was really his thoughts to be admitted that much devoid of realism as based on a truly abysmal political naivety.

"*It is known that even in office* - continues Carlo Cavallero - *He had given Gen. Ambrosio order to prepare a plan for disengagement of the Germans*", but this must be understood in the sense of recovering the divisions from the Balkans. After the Anglo American landing, in fact, the 2nd Army of Roatta announced - at the request of the Comando Supremo - to be able to return to Italy from Croatia by two to six-seven divisions. However, it soon became clear that it was a flash in the pan. In the second half of November 1942 Roatta was summoned to Rome by Cavallero, he directed a new winter operating cycle in Croatia, put in place from Gen. Loehr, commander of German forces in the Balkans, for the following December. The operation, called conventionally *Weiss*, gradually engage almost all the divisions of the 2nd Army until mid 1943. However, for a far-reaching plan of Cavallero it would certainly not serve Ambrosio, who intended to settle at the first opportunity.

Undoubtedly something had to stir the soul and mind of Cavallero:

"(...) I am aware - wrote Gen. Zanussi - that those who were close to him more he, between autumn and winter 1943, has really kept the talk, as mentioned in the memorial, which They realized that the bankrupt path on which he had put behind Germany and fascism, and the need to change course before it was too late"⁽⁵⁶⁾.

Although it has concrete evidence about, it is to assume that such contacts had acquired the substance from February 1943, at least according to the testimony of his son: *"When he was free to breathe, made agreements essential to a transition of the military command from Mussolini to the King. On this all present agreed to act"*⁽⁵⁷⁾.

For his part, Mussolini was looking for the right time to remove from the scene both Cavallero and Ciano. On December 17, Vittorio Emanuele III showed somewhat amazed, with Puntoni, to seeing the Chief of the General Staff General, received in audience the day before, more concerned about their own political image than for the performance of operations. *"I also spoke with the Duce - said the King -and the Duce took the opportunity to attack deeply Cavallero, whose position therefore appears shaken. Who does not realize he is just the Chief of the General Staff General (...)"*⁽⁵⁸⁾.

Moreover, Cavallero knew which side the wind blow to him more contrary. On the evening of January 10, he went to Mussolini and Ciano complained of interference in his control action, said an authoritative intervention to stop the unpleasant situation. Mussolini promised to talk to the foreign minister and the next day he left for Rocca delle Caminate. It was in the silence and in the rest of the ten days spent in Romagna that he conceived the thought of eliminating both antagonists.

On January 21 Ciano learned from his father in law of replacing Cavallero, probably with Gen. Ago, was imminent. On the 25th Mussolini did to the King *"another tirade against Cavallero,"* as reported by Puntoni. Afternoon of the 30th the dismissal letter and the appointment of Ambrosio. On February 3, Cavallero was received at the Quirinale. After the taking leave of the king, he stopped for a few minutes by Puntoni and said: *"They accuse me of being too weak with the Germans and that he suggested the military situation in its stark reality. I let them talk (...)"*⁽⁵⁹⁾.

The dismissal of Cavallero provoked the army and the public extremely favorable impression. Ambrosio probably did not have the mental stature and even the highly skilled but Cavallero, which had reached the point of things, at the helm needed a man of character. And, for sure, Ambrosio was available. Of exemplary honesty, selfless, hard, it seemed the most suitable to make the point with Mussolini and with the Germans.

It is not clear who was overseeing his candidacy. Seems Ciano, on clear suggestion of some top military leader. The King would have preferred a different name, but not raised

the difficulty knowing the firmness of Ambrosio, his sincere and deep attachment to the Crown and his equally rooted antipathy, if not hostility, towards the fascists and the Germans. Surprising, however, that Mussolini has accepted. Dollmann remarked:

"In those days Mussolini had signed the first act of his political suicide, replacing Marshal Cavallero with General Ambrosio to the post of Chief of the General Staff [General] (...).

For the Germans, the replacement was even more damaging. Cavallero, who outwardly seemed a captain of industry in uniform, had been under the thumb of the German soldiers always expressing admiration for German military directives. Ambrosio, as all senior officers, he hated him and soon we had great difficulty”⁽⁶⁰⁾.

The morning of January 31, Mussolini received Ambrosio and told him to have chosen as the new Chief of the General Staff General. The crux of the interview is expressed by the following few lines:

M. "What you propose to do?"

A. "Call home our divisions used across borders, ease the functions of the Comando Supremo, dragging your feet in front of the Germans."

M. "it's fine."

We do not know what it was that inspired the approval of Mussolini. Perhaps it was only formal. Perhaps the intentions of Ambrosio coincided with his hidden desires. Although he felt obliged to play the role of leader and radiate confidence and security, he could not pretend that his attitude "service" was convincing. Probably he had something more to cling to and now see each other alongside a man notoriously averse to compromise and decided calmed him to some extent. However, if he felt implicitly raised by the presence of this man, certainly he felt that he not only would not have hesitated, but also sought to push to face Hitler personally.

The topics mentioned by Ambrosio covered heightened complexity. First of all there was the matter of the Comando Supremo, the operation of which is not yet fulfilled. The proclamation of "Rome as an Open City" had forced some concrete measures, namely to bring out of town at least the military operations centers. In December, the operations department of the Comando Supremo had moved to Carbognano, near Lake Vico. Except that the persistence of Mussolini in Rome, that he would have to move into the Caprarola, forced the leaders of the G.S. to remain in the capital with their respective personnel. Ultimately, the operations department of the Comando Supremo remained isolated in the home country up to the invasion of Sicily, after which it was brought to the palace of Vidoni. As for the functioning of the whole body, shall we say, without going into details, that the intention of Ambrosio to phase out the specific responsibility of the individual branches of the armed forces found no

ability to implement because of the timing of events.

On appeal in Italy's divisions across the border, the reference concerned essentially the Balkans and, in particular, the divided and occupied Yugoslavia. There the situation is more and more tangled.

The local antagonists were three: the *Ustasa* of Pavelic, the *Chetniks* of Mihailovic and Tito's communist partisans. The struggle between them, had acquired such atrocious. The *Ustasa*, Croats and Catholics, officially our allies, were turned enemies of anyone but the Croatian and Catholic and, mainly, of any national minority or religious in their regions and in the vicinity⁽⁶¹⁾. The *Chetniks*, Serb and Orthodox, militated in whose ranks many former officers of the Yugoslav army, had come to watch Italians with its sympathy because we defended against the savage violence of the *Ustasa* and the oppression of the Germans, and, consequently, They adapted to operate on our side against the Communist bands. The partisans or "rebels" were against all, Italians and Germans, *Ustasa* and *Chetniks*. How to "stretch" rivaled the *Ustasa*.

Ambrosio had the opportunity to touch the topic already on February 6 with the Gen. Warlimont, of the OKW. The first action of the year (*Weiss 1st*), in Croatia, which the *Sassari* and *Re Inf.* Divs. competed with German and Croatian troops, was ending, though with uncertain results. The request for Warlimont to comb the ground were immediately occupied by Italian units, Ambrosio said quietly not to be able to adhere. "*It is indeed our intention to withdraw forces from Croatia,*" he specified. "*This communication-* replied Warlimont - *will not be welcome at the OKW*". At that, Ambrosio, more coldly, he reserved to talk with Mussolini and Roatta. On February 12, then, in another meeting, he confirmed the orientation to Warlimont.

Hitler intervened. He did it with a long letter to the Duce in which he lingered at length on the Balkans. Given that asked to send the 2nd Army instructions serving to "*ensure cooperation without friction and stings*" between Italian and German Command, he took a position openly against the *Chetniks*:

"A particular hazard perceived, or Duce, outside the framework of the current operations against the communists, in the development of the movement of Mihailovic. (...) Said movement, energetically directed and skillfully organized and led by the political standpoint only awaits the moment when will attack us with prospects of success.

Weapons and supplies necessary for the execution of such plans, Mihailovic tries to obtain them pretending to help your troops in the pacification of the country (...) and then take up the struggle against us (...). I must, Duce, according to my firm conscience, put you in seriously guard against a continuation of such a policy and can signal to you in the governing circles of the of the movement of Mihailovic are carried out extensive preparations for the annihilation or the disarmament of your own forces in Herzegovina and in Montenegro (...)"

In essence, the *Chetniks* were to be considered, as the communist partisans, fierce enemies of the Axis and therefore "*before all else*

that should come immediately suspended all supplies of weapons and supplies." It was necessary to disarm them, surround them, starve and destroy them. First one and then the other.

To support this thesis on February 24 Ribbentrop came to Rome, accompanied by Warlimont and by the Italian ambassador in Berlin, Alfieri. The following day he was received at Palazzo Venezia with Alfieri, von Mackensen and Bastianini. He handed the letter of Hitler and said arguments by following closely and development. As a strategic plan, he said that Germany could stabilize the Eastern Front in the summer, thus improving considerably the possibility of direct intervention in favor of Italy. But the basic argument, while it touched, the comparison was postponed to the 26th, when it would this be Ambrosio.

The minutes of the meeting of the 26th is short and shows a substantial final agreement⁽⁶²⁾. But it does not show exactly what happened. The seat, moved unexpectedly, showed what stuff was Gen. Ambrosio. Participants had taken place in the meeting hall of the Palazzo Venezia. The start had been symptomatic. Having Mussolini took to speak in German with Ribbentrop, Ambrosio said in a firm tone - and obtained - that discussion to happen in their own language with subsequent translation by the interpreters. The German point of view was based on the probability of the upcoming opening of a second Anglo-American front in Greece, supported by the immediate aid of the *Chetniks* and Tito partisans in the rear of the Axis. Therefore the Führer believed necessary for the unity of command throughout the Balkans entrusted to Gen. Loehr and the immediate commencement of operations against the *Chetniks* and communists to give tranquility to the occupied territory.

The question of the only German command was not new. It was on the table for a couple of months, albeit under the formula of "coordination". Cavallero had discussed it with Gen. Loehr in early January, concluding with the opportunity to improve connections between the OB *Südost* and Italian armies. The most rational solution could not only be that of direct contacts, from time to time, depending on the regional circumstances. The OKW had returned to the appointment, through the military attaché in Rome, on January 23. He asked the approval of the Comando Supremo to the extent of employment with OB *Südost* Italian units in the Balkans "*in the event of an enemy attack*" and "*extent necessary*". The order would become operative at the branch - by OKW - the conventional formula "Viktoria Italy".

Cavallero still refused and, speaking with Kesselring, said among other things that did not intend to put Gen. Geloso under command of a Loehr. "*I would be rightly accused* - he explained - *not defending the prestige of our commanders*"⁽⁶³⁾. Kesselring said that in all likelihood the OKW was to keep all the forces in the Balkans, including Bulgarian and Romanian units, under its control because forming the right wing of the Eastern Front.

Ambrosio knew all these previous so his response was immediate and negative. The adoption of a single command, replied, was not, at least at the moment, sufficient reasons; operations in a big way in the winter and in mountainous areas, against an opponent that one out of combat and preferred the guerrillas, could not produce concrete results.

At this point we leave the word to a witness. "Faced with this unexpected position of Gen. Ambrosio - he told then Lt.Col. Mellano -Ribbentrop became pale with poorly contained anger. It was incredible that an Italian general who dared oppose the intentions of the Führer! Angry voice, he said that in fact in the Balkans Commands Italians did not play a policy of cooperation with the Germans, but a policy for a particular purpose. It was obvious that we wanted to conduct military operations in common with us because the *Chetniks* were considered allies, but instead had to be considered enemies of the Axis as all other rebel partisans. In this address, opposed to any cooperation with the German ally, stood out General Pirzio Biroli, Governor of Montenegro.

"It was an indictment itself, which also revealed itself clearly the reasons for the proposals set out in the beginning. Mussolini, as knowledge of the German language, he understood the true meaning of the statement of Ribbentrop, hunched quietly and remained silent. Meanwhile, however, the interpreter translated into Italian. I noticed right away, as they had during the translation, that General Ambrosio showed indignation and anger growing. In the end, amid the general surprise, planted a formidable fist on the desk, much to topple the pens and pencils from under the nose of Mussolini who faced him, and, turning to the German Foreign Minister, he said in an agitated voice: "*I do not allow a foreigner to speak in this way of an Italian general!*" Then there was an awkward silence" ⁽⁶⁴⁾.

After that, Ambrosio announced curtly to the Germans that "from that moment on he would consider military issues solely from the point of view of the needs of Italy. The Duce, that at the outbreak of war had similar words not dared one thing, sighed with relief that the responsibility of raised shields if someone took it again" ⁽⁶⁵⁾.

The meeting was quickly closed. Mussolini is reserved to make known the decisions and Ambrosio got up and went to first with a strict and careful click of heels, a kind of farewell, to Mussolini and Ribbentrop" ⁽⁶⁶⁾.

The next day the Comando Supremo received the conclusions of the Duce. First, the coordination between the Axis troops in the Balkans is required and must be implemented by the German commander of the South-east. Second, it was necessary to crush the rebellion in the occupied territories and then study with the Germans large police operations in common.

Ambrosio had not had any illusions. Do not blink, and only in late spring will order the partial execution of these directives.

The interview caused a sensation among the Germans. Ribbentrop did not hesitate to vent his exasperation with Alfieri in a private conversation. " He had to say - so reported the German report - quite clearly that during his meeting with the Duce had experienced some resistance from the military lords, who had given the impression that they were not convinced of the necessity of Croatian operations, when observed not have enough troops (...) had the impression that behind the observation of Ambrosio, according to which it was a political issue, perhaps there was something mysterious in many groups of senior officers not They were clear about the links between the different theaters of operations (...). In the Italian Supreme Command there were trends that you could say were not precisely fascist"⁽⁶⁷⁾.

Ribbentrop was received on March 1st once again at Palazzo Venezia, present only Alfieri, von Mackensen and Bastianini. Mussolini announced that he had given the necessary instructions to Ambrosio and assured his interlocutor that Ambrosio "was an excellent man who would not make promises they could not keep, but in all the circumstances would have carried out the orders of the Duce." The conversation was held in rather general terms and ended with talk face to face between Mussolini and Ribbentrop, without witnesses.

Foreign Minister of the Reich returned home unsatisfied and it left traces. The clash with Ambrosio will be remembered by the *Völkischer Beobachter* in October of that year, with the comment that in that context "*is clearly manifested a certain tendency of the Italian General Staff against the German army and the sabotage of the orders of the Duce.*"

In fact, by the Germanic it was indicated strong to take the reins of a fight increasingly difficult and harsh. Evidently the Italian ally now did not offer solid guarantees. On February 13, at a news conference at the headquarters of Hitler, Adm. Doenitz, the new commander of the *Kriegsmarine*, complained of the leeway left by the R. Marina to British submarines who dared to appear before the ports of the peninsula; and he informed that he had set up a new Italian Naval Command, assigned to Adm. Ruge, with the task of leading a security service for German convoys in the central Mediterranean. Naval officers with experience of war in the North Sea and the Atlantic and anti-aircraft artillery officers already aboard destroyers and with equal experience of war were sent to Italy in late February for missions on Italian convoys. Even - taking an idea of Kesselring for German personnel on board Italian ships to help tame the fires - Ruge, promptly joined in part, he proposed to put on the ships Germanic crews and improve the training of Italian officers with accelerated courses. This because of the serious losses

suffered by the escort ships were mainly due to Italian "*deficiencies in tactical and ballistic education* " ⁽⁶⁸⁾. Ruge soon will realize the real state of things.

In December, Roosevelt and Churchill were waiting with confidence the rapid and brilliant conclusion of Torch. Arose, therefore, the question of what to do once occupied the entire coast of North Africa.

In order to fix ideas about it, they proposed to Stalin a tripartite meeting. The unavailability of the Soviet partners led the Anglo-Americans to choose their Casablanca for a meeting and a purely military debate.

The conference took place January 14 to 24. Of course, in the meantime he had verified news of various kinds on the African theater: the assassination of Admiral. Darlan, the sharp setback inflicted by 5th *Panzerarmee* on Allied troops in Tunisia and yet another massacre committed by a 'pack' of *U-boat* against a slow convoy of nine tankers departing from Trinidad. Just two of them managed to reach Gibraltar and this reinforced the decision to assign top priority to the safety of sea lanes.

In the Mediterranean, now he could breathe, because Malta had acquired full efficiency. He had three squadrons of torpedo bombers, two medium bombers, eight fighters including three of long range, and was working on an enhancement of its offensive value to strike at the Axis air and naval traffic between Italy and Tunisia. To this end, the island had received other submarines and torpedo boats, and there had been reconstituted *Force K* (Adm. Power) with three cruisers and four destroyers, while at Bona was based *Force Q* with three cruisers and two destroyers.

In the Atlantic the speech was absolutely different. 1942 had ended with the sinking of fourteen ships of a convoy attacked by twenty *U-boats*, so that the budget of the year showed a total loss of more than six million tons of cargo against a hundred German submarines sunk. True it is that in the autumn the production of yards British and Americans had taken to overcome the level of losses and was quickly catching up with the heavy burden, however, the war against the *U-boat* was not yet won.

The conference opened with a series of preliminary contacts between the two staffs, which brought to light an almost resigned conviction of the impossibility to enter into *Round-up* before the late spring of 1944 and, at the same time, a considerable divergence of views on the commitments of war up to that time.

For the British orientation was clear: to maximize the effects of the conquest of Libya and Tunisia to the triple intent to force Italy out of the conflict, does not give respite to Germany, Turkey to intervene on the Allied side. Of course they would continue supplies to the Soviet Union and continued preparations for *Bolero*. If circumstances were considered favorable for

good chances for success, an expeditionary force of 20-25 divisions at most could land on the European continent at the end of the summer of that same 1943. However it was to be excluded as dangerous in every respect any untimely and insufficient initiative. In essence, operation *Husky* (invasion of Sicily) or *Brimstone* (invasion of Sardinia) and the subsequent rush into Italian peninsula would have determined with much likelihood the fall of Mussolini and Italy out of the way; Hitler forced a costly campaign in the Mediterranean at the expense of defense in Western Europe; provided air bases to hit factories of war in southern Germany and the Romanian oilfields. If we had managed to get Turkey to enter the war, supplies to the Soviet Union they would have benefited greatly and commitments of Germany in Southeast Europe have further weakened the Western Front.

The Americans thought differently. Not only saw as operations in the Mediterranean could have a substantial effect on *Round-up*, but even feared that the fight would end in Italy to absorb precious resources massed for landing in the West, bleeding the Allies as Tunisia was bleeding the Axis. So if you can not attack France within the year, he might as well pay a little attention to the Japanese threat. All in all, this was the point. Although after the battles of the Coral Sea and Midway appeared averted a real danger of further expansion of Japan, battles of Guadalcanal and New Guinea had placed in evidence showed that the Japanese are fighting literally "to the last man." The very thought of having to conquer one after another the peripherals bases created by the enemy before they get to the big national islands, at the cost of enormous sacrifice of American lives was unsustainable for the Pentagon. So if you recognize inevitable stagnation operating in Europe in 1943, a substantial share of amphibious vehicles could be devoted to the needs of Asia: would allow the British the reconquest of Burma to re-open the way for the Chungking and for the Americans the consolidation of Japanese on the islands Solomon.

To be fair, Roosevelt did not agree at all on this approach to the problem. Accepting a stagnation operating in Europe was likely to cause even a Stalin-Hitler agreement modeled on that of 1939 and, by the way, allowed freedom of action to the *Wehrmacht*, free of other pressing commitments, still seemed able to put on your lap the Red Army.

On January 20, the long and exasperating discussions-in which was inserted the trouble of putting together Giraud and De Gaulle, called at a later time ⁽⁶⁹⁾ - ended in a plenary meeting chaired by Roosevelt and Churchill, where general features of the future strategy took final shape. The final document, entitled "The conduct of the war in 1943" included substantially

the British concept and, as far as concerned the war in the Mediterranean, said in summary that the objectives were twofold:

- a) occupy the Sicily in order to make it even more secure line of communication across the Mediterranean, to ease German pressure on the Russian front and to intensify the pressure on Italy;
- b) create a situation for an order for active cooperation of Turkey.

The strategic principle of "Germany first" was confirmed, but nothing appeared on the continuation of the struggle against Italy. The fact is that the Americans were acting in accordance with a very simple things. They loved to point out that they were interested "*only winning the war*" and, knowing the power of its industry, believed enough amass UK military force so massive and so well equipped to set foot in France in spite of the German defense. They were not sure, however, that the British they insisted the Mediterranean for military considerations and not political.

The composition of the various points of view was finally reached, even if something remained suspended. Meanwhile, it was urgent to solve the battle of Tunisia. The end of the campaign could not be far away, even if some logistical snag had unexpectedly stopped the race of the 8th Army and sparked a fierce polemic against the *Royal Navy* and, more specifically, against the Adm. Harwood, naval commander in chief of the Mediterranean.

After the entry into Tripoli the first troops of the 8th Army, the first concern was to bring to use the port. For various reasons the main characters involved in the issue did not show up that early in the 25th. The 26th works were commenced. It was not easy thing because the harbor entrance was completely blocked with six merchant ships and several smaller filled with concrete blocks, the two piers were thoroughly wrecked and port facilities badly damaged just by the raids of the allied air forces. In addition, the harbor was littered with wrecks and ships on fire. For four days the British ships had to unload supplies outside of the harbor with landing craft and rafts (about 400 tons. per day), then the opening of a hole in the middle of the block allowed the unloading on the docks at the rate of a thousand tons daily. Finally, on February 4 Churchill and Alexander could see the first two large merchant enter the port through a gap of 33 meters and a depth of 8 meters. From 1 February were unloaded daily 2,000 tons and 3,500 at the end of the month.

Montgomery was undoubtedly a success and expressed his satisfaction for the "*remarkable rapidity*" ⁽⁷⁰⁾ with which the Royal Navy had been working. Passed over that on January 26 had delivered himself a furious and merciless condemnation of the superficiality with which the matter was addressed, so ruthless that it

he came to Churchill and Brooke and ended with the exoneration of Admiral. Harwood⁽⁷¹⁾.

Natural consequence of the well-established Anglo-American cooperation was the new structure established for the organization of command in the theater of the Mediterranean, clearly distinct from that of the Levant: Eisenhower supreme commander with Alexander as a deputy; the Chief Air Mar. Tedder and Adm. Cunningham commanders respectively air and sea. This order was to take effect in February.

Gen. Brooke did not seem enthusiastic about the solution and on January 20, warmly, he noted in his diary:

"From many points of view it was desirable to give this command to the Americans; but unfortunately in this case it ended in Eisenhower ... who had no experience nor the strategic tactics needed to tackle such a feat. Gaining Alexander from the Middle East and appointing deputy of Eisenhower, we did so to flatter the Americans and at the same time to help them, because we put our expert general under the orders of their general who had no experience.

We were trying, in essence, to push Eisenhower in the stratosphere, in the rarefied height of the supreme commander where he would be free to devote himself to political problems and those of the inter-allied relationships, while inserting immediately below him one of our commanders to look after close of military situation and it would restore the necessary coordination that had been so dangerously neglected"⁽⁷²⁾.

In Casablanca, Churchill had not raised any objections whatsoever but, back in England thought he should put his hands on with Roosevelt, warning him that surely the appointment of Eisenhower would have raised a hornet's nest by the British press, in tune with public opinion. Therefore proposed to report that Eisenhower became supreme commander, Alexander commander of Allied forces in Tunisia and Tedder commander of the air force (Adm. Cunningham kept his job, but was extended up to and including Malta). To realize the state of the English mind, it should be recalled that due to the enormous development of the US armed forces almost all higher degrees of need were covered with promoting 'temporary'. Which means that on February 11, Eisenhower received his fourth general's star thanks to the appointment as supreme commander, but in the yearbook of the officers on active duty ... was still a lieutenant colonel.

The conference was made also a determination that later received many and founded criticism, to the point of being considered as one of the biggest mistakes of the political ally: the unconditional surrender of Germany, Italy and Japan.

On the subject, Churchill harbored some uncertainty and on January 20, during the discussions, he turned to the War Cabinet and asked to inspect the opportunity to limit the formula to Germany and Japan. "*The omission of Italy* - he explained - *would serve to fuel*

trends in this country is favorable to a separate peace." In London, the issue was immediately called into question and the next day he left the answer:

"The Cabinet, evaluated all the pros and cons, it was unanimous in considering that it is not appropriate to the exclusion of Italy, since it would inevitably result in concerns in Turkey, the Balkans and elsewhere. We are not even convinced that the exclusion would give rise to favorable reactions in Italy. It is far more likely to achieve the desired effect from the Italian by conveying all the troubles which are to meet" ⁽⁷³⁾.

However, the decision was an account and an account statement from the branch to the closing of the talks. According to Churchill, the document was prepared and weighed every word and it excluded any reference to unconditional surrender. So strong was his surprise and Gen. Ismay when the press conference held on January 24 Roosevelt gave the announcement to the world and to the enemy.

In Italy the press ridiculed the Allies' purposes and public opinion showed itself no sign of reaction. But in Germany, as was mentioned earlier, the repercussions were considerable:

"The German people and particularly the army - said Guderian - the effect of this brutal claim was profound. Especially deep for soldiers. Now there could be no more doubt whatsoever that the enemies were motivated by the will of annihilation of the German people. So their struggle was not - as they claimed for propaganda reasons - only against the so-called Hitler and Nazism, but against the laborious and therefore uncomfortable German economic competitor " ⁽⁷⁴⁾.

Even in the Allied camp a step so reckless aroused controversy. Roosevelt tried to shake off the burden: in his opinion, the sentence had not been premeditated and in the press conference "*the thought is wedged in my mind (...) and the next thing I knew was that I had said*" ⁽⁷⁵⁾, but Sherwood, his close associate and friend, denied that version claiming that the announcement was a political act meditated and fully responding to the firm conviction of the President not to allow a negotiated peace, or something similar to Fourteen points of Wilson, whose terms could be circumvented by a new Hitler ⁽⁷⁶⁾.

As for Stalin, who despite not having any intention of negotiating the surrender took care not to proclaim, on Feb. 23 he said publicly that "*it would be ridiculous to identify the gang of Hitler with the German people and the Germans*" and that it was "*a stupid lie and a slander nonsense*" the affirmation of the Western press that the Red Army was intended to "*exterminate the German people, and destroy the Germanic state*" ⁽⁷⁷⁾.

NOTES TO CHAPTER IV

- (1) B. Liddell Hart, *Military History of World War II*, cit., P. 478.
- (2) In mid-December the 50th special brigade includes the following units: I/91st Inf., II/92nd Inf. *Gracto* bn., XV Tank bn., V Tunisian Volunteers bn., VI mtr. group Lancers of *Aosta*, two companies Border Guard mtr., a company of the 8th Bersaglieri and one of the 10th, a 47/32 semoventi company, the DLVII 75/18 semoventi group, the XXXV and LXXII group 75/46, two batteries of 75 / 27. Also it included three German units: the 47th *Panzergranadiere*, the 334th Recon group and a company of infantry. Overall it was 7,700 Italians (including 400 officers) and 1,530 Germans (including 30 officers).
- (3) The same Broccoli, however, soon will experience within the 5th Armored Army Command the existence of a state of mind of prevention, to say the least, with regard to Italian. This revealed itself fully in the attitude assumed where was complained, often wrongly, every accident or incident to which Italian troops were involved.
- (4) In fact Ciano did not waste time: "*Even Mussolini is quite a bad mood* - he noted in his diary -*The deliver the report on the trip, in which I made clear my thoughts and I do not hide my negative impressions. I speak also of Cavallero, who flaunts servility in the relations with the Germans. "Cavallero has now passed* - he says - *a few years ago he had a lively brain. Not any more. "But no mention of the person you intend to replace. He invites me to send to His Majesty a copy of my report*" (G.Ciano, op cited; p. 679).).
- (5) When Sogno appeared the difficulties that would have met to support the primacy of Italian interests in the political and military aspects in Tunis and Bizerte, established by Mussolini, Cavallero argued that unfortunately now the Germans had preceded us.
- (6) See Sogno, *Op. cited* above, p. 56.,
- (7) In the event, Sogno will replicate Gen. Ziegler that all Italian anti-tank units had been concentrated in the area of *Superga*, operating directly under the army, to the detriment of other Italian sectors, what would not have happened if the Italian commander had extended its executive management also to the sector of the *Superga* .
- (8) It is worthwhile to bring a sad commentary on the commander of the 91st Infantry: "*December 24. Incidentally remember my troops did not reach even the gift of a cigarette or a postcard. The German troops to our side received in time all sorts of gifts! But it does not matter*" (meeting with Ghinozzi , sector commander of Sousse). Note that the German troops receiving the gifts were a company in Kairouan and a battery of 88 in Sousse.
- (9) M. Clark, *op. cited* above, p. 134.
- (10) Unlike the British, the Americans used the Roman numerals for the order of the corps. To simplify and better distinguish between those allies corps from the Axis, the Arabic numerals are used for the large US units.
- (11) I.S.O. Playfair, *op. cited* above, p. 180.
- (12) Alphonse juin, *Memoires*, Fayard, Paris, 1959, p. 137.
- (13) M. Clark, *op. cited* above, p. 140.
- (14) A. Juin, *op. cited* above, pp. 138-141.
- (15) G. Howe, *op. cited* above, p. 150.
- (16) The *Kampfgruppe* Weber consisted of: 756th mountain troops of two battalions, II/69th *Panzergranadiere*, 501st armored group with *Tiger*, I/54th Flak, 49th armored battalion pioneers, a few batteries of 334th with 105 artillery and minor units!.
- (17) The *Kampfgruppe* Koch, was composed of the following units: 5th *Luftwaffenjaeger*, I and III/69th *Panzergranadiere*, the A-24 battalion di marcia and three companies of the 7th *Panzerregiment*. The fire support was given by the 90th artillery and a group of the 52nd Flak.
- (18) The three sub-sectors of the *Superga* were kept, from the north, by the T 5 battalions,

- I/92nd Inf. and A 22. However, this indication is essentially related to the battalion commands. In fact, each of them included Italian and German companies of different battalions: T 5, A 22, A 25, K 10 to I/47th Germans and II/91st, and the II/92nd Italian as well as units of accompaniment and tanks.
- (19) Combat Command B included: II/13th Tank, II/6th Arm. Inf., 27th Self Prop. Art. Bn. of 105/22, 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion and several minor units.
- (20) In his report at the end of operation *Eilbote* Col. Weber put in evidence the similar deficiencies, albeit to a lesser extent, to those found by Gen. Gelich for *Superga*: "The subordinate commands are not yet oriented. The leaders are sometimes brave, but they lack the understanding of the general situation, so that they are therefore misunderstandings. The tactic is placed (ie allow initiative) does not give good results, you have to supervise the implementation. Also are of paramount importance connections. "As for the enemy, Weber judged: "The value of the French soldier is limited, their weaponry and command have shortcomings. The exception is the artillery which well shot" (DSCS, f. 582/NC 01/28./1943 given by Lt. Col. Broccoli).
- (21) Eisenhower, he said, would express his plan as a doubt: if the entire US 2nd Corp could be collected in the region of Tebessa and if enemy remained quiet, you could attempt an advance towards Gabes or Sfax, but not if they could predict the results will the consequences (D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*, Mondadori, Milan 1949, p. 179).
- (22) Combat Command A at that time consisted of: III/1st Tank, 1/6th Arm. Inf., I/26th Inf., 701st Tank Destroyer Battalion, 33rd and 91st Field Art. Bns, 443rd A/T Bn. and minor units.
- (23) At 02:30 of the 31st, knew that the defenders of Faid still resisting, Welvert phoned again Fredendall begging him to attack at dawn and shouting: "*It would be a shame, my general, let's capture French battalion fighting here all day with derisive weapons against more than 50 tanks*" (L. Koeltz, *op. cited above*, p. 195).
- (24) The garrison of the Station of Sened overwhelmed on January 24 American incursion was made by a dismounted squadron of the *Aosta*, a few platoons of riflemen, a battery 75, a cannon of 88 and two German machine guns. The attack was led by Combat Command C: III/6th Arm. Inf., A company of the 13th Tanks, a battery of the 68th field artillery and smaller units. He made 96 prisoners and suffered insignificant losses..
- (25) Combat Command D consisted of the III/13th Tanks, I/168th Inf., A code company, a couple of field batteries and minor units.
- (26) Without wishing to emphasize unduly the episode, it is undeniable the frequency with which such incidents happened when a sector or garrison Italian-German was entrusted to an Italian commander. Much depended also on the fact that being usually connections in German hands, to improve efficiency of the radio stations, it became almost impossible to Italians commanders check the accuracy of the interpretation given by the German personnel. And when they justified an early setback with the Italian collapse, the explanation was always taken for good by the German Command.
- (27) George F. Howe, *Northwest Africa: Seizing the Initiative in The West*, Washington, DC, 1957, p. 397.
- (28) G. Howe, *op. cited above*, p. 397.
- (29) E. Faldella, *L'Italia nella seconda guerra mondiale*, Cappelli, Bologna 1947, p.524.
- (30) G. Ciano, *op. cited above*, p. 678.
- (31) L. Simoni, *op. cited above*, p. 298. The description of the environment made by Lanza also recounts: "*The atmosphere of this headquarters is depressing. It looks like a college of alienated, implanted in a cursed place. It breathes a unhealthy humidity and one gets the impression of being constantly on the verge of being brought before a court-martial for treason*" (Ibid, p. 299).
- (32) *Diary Cavallero*, date 12.18.1942.
- (33) L. Simoni, *op. cited above*, p. 300.

- (34) *Ibid*, p. 301..
- (35) On January 28, 1943 Mussolini will speak to a overall availability of 4,836 aircraft plus 4,434 more for training, but he will hasten to make clear that the aviators had to rely on a lot less.
- (36) USSME, *Verhali*, cit., Vol. IV, Rome 1985, pp. 279-303.
- (37) L. Simoni, *op. cited* above, p. 306.
- (38) Regardless of Ciano, hostility to Cavallero, several military personalities were demonstrating long open dissent, so that to November 20 the same Vittorio Emanuele III had spoken with Mussolini.
- (39) Carlo Cavallero *Il dramma del maresciallo Cavallero*, Mondadori, Milan, 1962, p. 150.
- (40) P. Puntoni, *op. cited* above pp. 103-104.
- (41) *Ibid*, p. 115.
- (42) Eugene Dollmann, *Roma nazista*, Longanesi, Milano, 1950, pp. 128-129.
- (43) Gen. Ceriana Mayneri, usually measured in judgment, said: "*The Marshal Cavallero was replaced yesterday by General Amhrosio. It was time for him to leave he was too tied of the Germans*" (Carlo Ceriana Mayneri, *Parla un comandante di truppe*, Rispoli, Naples 1947, p. 136).
- (44) E. Faldella, *op. cited* above, pp. 554-561. Rommel is expressed with words of fire: "*The removal of Marshal Cavallero (...) came as a welcome news. Would have been much better if this man were replaced long ago by someone a little more competent*" (B. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, cited above, p. 393).
- (45) E. von Rintelen, *op. cited* above pp. 178-179.
- (46) Gen. Puntoni noted under the date of July 28, 1942: "*Cavallero, among other things, does not agree with the Duce for the promotion of Bastico and said that he thought would be better to leave things as they are*" (op. Cited above, p. 93).
- (47) In particular the staff of the G.S. Africa foresaw: secretarial, office operations, information office and transport office with 19 officers Italians and 16 Germans, 25 Italians and 54 Germans NCOs.
- (48) The draft letter of the Comando Supremo includes a paragraph in itself amply sufficient to justify any doubts about the planned organization of the theater: "*4. The 5th Army Command until further ensure the supply of the two Armies using to the German Intendenza in Tunisia. agree with the Commander 1st Army to the rear sub-division & eliminate differences with insertion of a commander in the rear, which for the completion of these tasks will depend directly from the Comando Supremo*" (DSCS, tele 055/Op. A. date 01/31/1943, 12:40).
- (49) *Diary* Cavallero, dates 26 and 28 Janury 1943.
- (50) *Ibid*, date 01/27/1943. Two days before Cavallero he had issued the following message:
"Following agreements reached between the Duce and the Fuhrer, from 6 o'clock am on the 26th current, the 5th Armored Army Command switches to the Comando Supremo dependencies. In matters of organization and supplies remain in force the existing hierarchical relations" (DSCS, this 01/Op. A., date 01/25/1943, 18:30).
- (51) *Diary* Cavallero, date 01.02.1943, meeting with General Ambrosio, Roatta, Geloso and Magli.
- (52) P. Puntoni, *op. cited* above, pp. 98-99.
- (53) *Ibid*, p. 107.
- (54) C. Cavallero, *op. cited* above, p. 153.
- (55) *Ibid*, p. 156.
- (56) Giacomo Zanussi, *Guerra e catastrofe d'Italia*, I, Corso, Rome, 1945, p. 293. The "memorial" alluded to it is to document issued by Cavallero to Gen. Carhoni, head of the SIM, 27 August 1943. According Carhoni, who went to Forte Boccea to question the orders of Marshal Badoglio, it was "a smart little memorial, 7 or 8 pages, full of absurdities and contradictions" in which Cavallero claimed to have conceived, in his time, a coup against Mussolini and the Germans (Giacomo Carboni, *Memorie segrete*, 1935-1948, Parenti, Florence 1955, p. 237).
- (57) C. Cavallero, *op. cited* above, p. 157.

- (58) P. Puntoni, *op. cited above*, p. 111.
- (59) *Ibid.*, p. 118.
- (60) Eugene Dollmann, *Un libero schiavo*, Cappelli, Bologna 1968, pp. 249-250.
- (61) Only in summer 1942, the pogroms unleashed by the *Ustaša* in Croatia had caused more than 300,000 victims among Serbs, Jews, Muslims and Gypsies. A clear idea of what happened in that region is provided by Edmond Paris, *Genocide in the Croatia satellite*, Club Editori, Milan 1976.
- (62) USSME, Minutes, cit., Vol. IV, pp. 322-324. For a letter of Hitler see Vittorio Zincone (ed), *Hitler and Mussolini*, Rizzoli, Milan, 1946, pp. 132-136. The report of the visit of Ribbentrop, however, is much reported in detail by Frederick Deakin, *Storia della repubblica di Salò*, Einaudi, Turin 1963, pp. 183-200, on the basis of German documents.
- (63) *Diary* Cavallero, date 01/24/1943.
- (64) Pietro Mellano, Rome to Brindisi (via Pescara), Picchi, Tivoli 1967, p. 35.
- (65) E. Dollman, *Roma nazista*, cit., P. 189. Col. Dollmann was present as a German interpreter.
- (66) P. Mellano, *op. cited above*, p. 36.
- (67) F. Deakin, *op. cited above*, p. 198.
- (68) Santoni Alberto and Mattesini Francesco, *La partecipazione tedesca alla guerra aeronavale nel Mediterraneo*, Ed. University and Gonzo, Rome 1980, pp. 349-350.
- (69) Roosevelt said: "*We met many difficulties in reconciling those two French generals that I thought to myself that it would be equally difficult to arrange a meeting between Grant and Lee ...*" (W. Churchill, *op. Cited above*, p. 314).
- (70) B. Montgomery, From El Alamein etc., Cited, p. 58.
- (71) The communication of Admiral Pound, First Sea Lord, the person said: "*I fear that the incomplete orders for the evacuation of the port of Tripoli of all obstructions have had a considerable influence on this decision*" (ISO Playfair, *op. cited*, p. 256). Most likely, however, he had also influenced some other 'incident' with Churchill.
- (72) Arthur Bryant, *Attacking (1941-1943)*, Blackwell 1966, pp. 503-504.
- (73) W. Churchill, *op. cited above*, p. 313.
- (74) Heinz Guderian, *Ricordi di un soldato*, Baldini and Castolid, Milan, 1962, p. 294.
- (75) Robert Sherwood, *The White House Papers of Harry Hopkins*, vol. II, New York, 1946, p. 693.
- (76) *Ibid.*
- (77) William H. Chamberlain, *America's 2nd Crusade*, Ragnery, Chicago, 1950, p. 289.

Chapter Five

THE LAST AXIS OFFENSIVE EFFORT

1. THE OPERATION OF THE FIRST OF FEBRUARY 1943.

After the abandonment of Tripoli and the realization of a sufficient structure of the beachhead Axis in Tunisia, it was necessary a careful examination of the situation to decide the address to give to the operations.

Summarize, first of all, the deployment of the German-Italian. To the north was placed 5th Armored Army of von Arnim, facing west, with 105,000 men and 464 tanks; south of the ACIT of Rommel (the High Command began to call it the 1st Army), facing south, with 225,000 men and 123 tanks. The limit of the field ran on the 34th parallel, with poor choice but correct from February 12 so as to leave to the first Maknassy-Sened-Sfax and Gafsa to the second. Each army, directly dependent on the Comando Supremo, was served by a delegation of the Intendenza. The contest aircraft were provided respectively the *Fliegerführer* Tunis with 285 aircraft and the Tunisian Air Force Command with 113.

The 5th Army had in the line the von Broich division, the 334th Inf. Div, the *Superga* Inf. Div, the 10th *Panzer* and the Italian XXX Corps (formed by the 50th special brigade, the 21st *Panzer* and, until February 12, the *Centauro* Arm. Div.). The ACIT side including the Sahara group in the desert area south of *Chotts* and the XX and XXI Corps on positions of Mareth. The *Afrika Korps*, bringing together the rearguard, was still partially in contact with the advanced elements of the British 8th Army.

In the early days of February he came on the carpet guidance cherished for some time by the OKW: the conquest of Teoessa. Von Arnim had immediately rejected the idea, not least because premature, but Kesselring was favorable and had spoken with Hitler in mid January. Moreover on January 27 the Chief of the G.S. of the 10th *Panzerdivision*, Lt.Col. Barker, visiting OKW, gave expression to what evidently was thinking of Gen. Fischer: the apparent reluctance to face the enemy a decisive battle favored the possibility of extending the bridgehead until the alignment Bona-Tozeur. To achieve this result was enough a determined offensive against Tebessa, since, as a result of a similar episode in depth, the entire northern front ally would be forced to retreat substantially. Since the opinion of those who came away from that theater of operations and was unaware of the events coincided with what is considered appropriate to the Headquarters of the Führer, Gen. Warlimont was immediately sent to Tunisia. As reported by *Kriegstagebuch* OKW, he had the task of proposing, among other things, "a thrust

on the enemy who has not yet consolidated the positions achieved and to attack, especially in the area of Tebessa, although a similar offensive attitude will further delay the gathering of forces in Tunisia or create some contemporary risk at the southern front."

At the Comando Supremo things were viewed somewhat differently. The first directive sent by Cavallero to von Arnim established as a main task of the 5th Army in the near future the forward movement of the left wing to a more suitable position to parry the expected attack of the Allies in style along the coast. *"Also - specifically – the army must prepare for a offensive action intended to destroy the American forces in the Tebessa area"*. As preliminaries, indicating the thrust west of Pont du Fahs (already designed), the conquest of Faïd and hills south and east of Gafsa. According Cavallero, for the operation of Tebessa he needed two armored divisions, one of which, implicitly, would have been the *Hermann Goering*, which promised the prompt start. Essentially, it was a program of some breathing space for the execution of which were not fixed times, at least restricted.

The American move to Maknassy seemed, to the Comando Supremo, create the opportunity in an profitable action on the direction of El Guettar - Gafsa. The task could be entrusted to the moving of the ACIT without undermining the next defensive battle against the 8th Army, with full Italian-German air support.

So on February 4 journeyed from Rome two messages. To the ACIT it is required to prepare as soon as a raid from the area of El Guettar against the enemy flank, while retaining the possibility of a dynamic reaction on the Mareth line⁽¹⁾. The 5th Armored Army, made aware of the aforementioned action, was ordered to *"organize operation to attack & annihilation of the American army"* and to raise awareness about a project. To do this, had to prepare a armored mass, avoiding to be employed and wear in local⁽²⁾ fighting²⁾.

At this point Rommel intervened. Despite his very recent statements that he could not much longer be kept at the command of the ACIT for health reasons, the air of Tunisia had given him new energies. So he writes to his wife on February 8:

"I decided to leave the command of only by explicit order, and to keep it regardless of my state of health. Given the situation, I intend to keep it more than possible, even against the advice of doctors. You will understand my attitude. The successor in Rome missed me will have to wait his turn"⁽³⁾.

Given the German conquest of the pass of Faïd and neglect of Sened station by the Americans, he began to consider *"the possibility, in the near future, an operation against Gafsa"*, as he wrote in his diary on February 4, after a visit

to the *Centauro*. The occupation of Gafsa, in fact, in his view would significantly removed the danger of the dreaded Allied offensive on Gabes and was achievable in the immediate future, taking advantage of the continuing rains to the north and the temporary stop of reordering of the 8th Army.

On the same day, therefore, he proposed to the Comando Supremo and to the OBS a operation performed with speed and surprise ready to expire; developed concentrically and with considerable force; conducted jointly regardless of the jurisdiction of the army.

The attack was to be carried by a robust share of the 5th Armored Army from the northeast and by a *Kampfgruppe* of the ACIT from the south. As concerned the latter, its limitations derived from the availability of only the 15th *Panzer*, remained with fifty tanks efficient, and the need for his speedy recovery, achieved the purpose, to avoid depriving the deployment location of Mareth of a perhaps decisive reserve.

The unitary conduct, of course, would be responsible to the proposer. Which he had already expressed to Gen. Messe no intention of leaving the ACIT. So Messe, which from zero hours of February 5 was supposed to take command of the Italian 1st Army ⁽⁴⁾, telegraphed to the Comando Supremo:

"I inform you of the passage of command, for agreements reached & following the desire expressed by Marshal Rommel, will take place in a few days, after Warlimont, which awaits your arrival, will issue reports defining dependencies parts of the German army (...)" ⁽⁵⁾.

The precedent made Ambrosio counterattack, but the operation was involved Gafsa, on which the Comando Supremo agreed - although with the passage of days changed the outlines- therefore preferred to leave even the old commander, whose tactical ability there was no doubt.

On 6 February, meanwhile, he heard Gen. Warlimont, was passing through Rome. The sent by the German OKW signaled a desire to attack immediately and violently the American 2nd Corp, believing that the most favorable moment. Ambrosio had nothing against it, except for the issue of the single command: it was necessary to establish as soon as a command of Army Group, which - in his opinion - it would be better able to organize, harmonize and carry out such a maneuver. Warlimont argued that the establishment of a command that level would be rather laborious and at the expense of the ACIT and that, consequently, the OKW would have preferred to postpone the decision on when the last of the rearguard of the ACIT were recovered, ie between two to three weeks. In essence, to the point where it was, he might as well entrust the task to the person of Rommel⁽⁶⁾.

For his part, Kesselring had presented a concise but convincing solution in principle. Ambrosio accepted it and on that basis issued conclusive directives:

"The purpose in the forthcoming operations through internal maneuver against American & British army is to gain space toward Gafsa & north of Gafsa & beat a part of the American army while they are ongoing preparations to attack the enemy (...).

It must first be occupied the Gafsa basin, then, correspondingly demeanor enemy attack in the open field and exploiting success conquer heights at the west basin, settling & secure against enemy action from Sbeitla. If enemy forces contrasts with relevant, it must be beaten & gain ground has secondary value (...).

Marshal Rommel is asked to communicate intentions & execution mode aerial attack. 1st & 5th Army forces are asked to communicate how many can be assigned to this operation and the date for which will be available, including services (...)"⁽⁷⁾.

The undertaking had to participate in all mechanized elements available either army, under the command of a general of the army corps of armored troops (ie German). The responsibility for the operation, however, was given to Rommel, without prejudice to its task of commander of the ACIT.

Meanwhile Warlimont had a long talk with von Arnim and realize that the situation proves more complex than imagined in Rastenburg. Just the day before the commander of the 5th Army had gone to visit the 21st *Panzer* and had met *Gen. Sogno*, with whom he had shown very little satisfied with the low rate of influx of troops and vehicles from Italy.

"He formulated predictions - he wrote in his report Dream - on the next steps and, rather, seemed to dwell on the difficulties that presented those examined. The commander of the corps, for example, expressed appreciation that the direct advance on Tebessa should devote at least three divisions, regardless of the troops destined for concurrent actions, and Arnim replied that he did not know whence to draw them and hence that, however, he feared would be insufficient (but, so saying, did not consider that the same logistical capacity in communications, in relation also to the need to carry traffic at night, would not easily permitted greater effort)".

The state, then, of the *Panzerdivisionen* proved disappointing. The 10th *Panzer* was partly absorbed by defensive duties and 21st still far from completion. The availability of tanks was equal to 50% of staff: 110 for the 10th *Panzer* and 91 for the 21st. In addition, the armored infantry of the two divisions was having severe deficiencies in terms of half-tracks and even cars. Finally, the 15th *Panzer* was still to be recovered (15 February only fall back on the back of the position of Mareth). Therefore:

"The commander of the Armored Army - telegraph Warlimont - intends to play in the coming days only an local attack on the southern sector (of the army) to beat a considerable grouping of enemy forces and inflicting heavy losses in men and material."

It is evident the emergence of a significant uncertainty at various levels. From one point of view, everyone seems to agree, it is felt by another

reserves more or less explicit. The less persuaded appeared von Arnim, but also within the Comando Supremo opinions do not seem to agree and the optimism Kesselring aroused considerable skepticism. In an internal memo dated 8 February, the operations office of the General Staff Africa summed up the problem specifications. According to Kesselring could put together a total of two hundred tanks, where in the opinion of the SIM the enemy could bring at least three hundred tanks (in practical training much lower however). Regardless, however, the balance of forces, the latest news signaled the likely withdrawal of the enemy from Gafsa, so facing the grave risk of not being able to engage and destroy the mass of US armor and having, on the other hand, maintain employment the basin of Gafsa, once reached. But the possession of Gafsa was not essential for operational developments to the north, it could cause reflections on the rest of the front. For more the adversary could attempt the separation between the 5th and the 1st Armies from Sbeitla, and in this case the lack of armored reserves on site would have been fatal. In conclusion, the operation would be costly in terms of logistics, it had little chance of leading to the annihilation of the US 2nd Corp and would cause a territorial expansion that worsen the defensive burden.

This lack of confidence in the validity of the initiative does not seem to have gone beyond the scope of the Comando Supremo and apparently did not affect Ambrosio. However, precisely on February 9 the highest military leaders in Tunisia gathered in Rennouche (immediately north of Gabes), home of *Fliegerführer Tunis*. Were present Kesselring, Rommel, von Arnim, and Messe, and for the Comando Supremo, Gen. Gandin.

Rommel opened the debate by recalling the urgency to act to the west before the 8th Army will gather in front of the positions of Mareth. So spoke von Arnim. Pointed out that the withdrawal of American units from Sidi Zid Eou and, apparently, also by Pichon and Gafsa, induced to think that the enemy was intended to focus at the passes of Sbeitla and Feriana, for the protection of Tebessa. So the attack on Sidi Eou Zid, was scheduled for the 12th, would collect little fruit about the elimination of substantial enemy units. In addition, it entailed laborious movements to rally the forces necessary for the operation and a large fuel consumption. Despite these negatives the project remained valid, supported von Arnim, provided to carry out the operation in two stages: first the action of Sidi Zid Eou by the 10th and 21st *Panzer*, then that of Gafsa by the 15th *Panzer*. The calendar-program could be as follows: February 12, beginning attack on the plain to the east of Sbeitla; the 13th, the end of the fight; the 14th, moving only the 21st *Panzer* southwesterly to contribute to the attack on Gafsa. This ended the operation. According to von Arnim, in fact, it was not raised a continuation

against the barriers of Sbeitla and Feriana. The advantages of land could be enough.

Kesselring did not share so restrictive a vision. Why exclude beforehand favorable developments? Rommel, whose mental reserves were imaginable, he avoided going into the merits of the argument and merely proposing 15 February as the date of commencement of the action of Gafsa. On this foundation, we closed the meeting.

The next day Rommel issued orders for *Morgenluft* (morning air) and he specified: "*If the army is limited to keep the conquered positions Gafsa or examines a continuation of operations towards Tebessa question is subject to the evolution of the situation.*" The conduct of the attack was entrusted to the command of the DAK, ruled temporarily to Col. von Liebenstein since Jan. 14 fell wounded Gen. Fehn⁽⁸⁾. The northern wing was to be made up of the bulk of the 21st *Panzer* and an a part of the *Centauro*, intended to be taken on by the DAK at the end of the battle of Sidi Bou Zid. The south - that is, the *Kampfgruppe* of the DAK -He had very heterogeneous composition: the *Panzergranadiere Afrika* regiment, the *Luftwaffenjägerbrigade*, a unit formed from the 8th *Panzerregiment*, the 33rd Recon. Bn., a part of the *Centauro* (the units that were in front of El Guettar), 7th Bersaglieri and artillery units and smaller units. It was supposed to have overcome the fierce resistance of at least one infantry regiment reinforced perhaps by tanks. About the D day, Rommel did not provide details, since it is tied to the time of the action of Sidi Bou Zid, however not considered possible before 14:00.

For his part, Gen. Ziegler, diverted for the occasion from the post of Chief of Staff of the 5th army, place manifested the plan for *Frühlingswind* (spring wind) as follows: the 10th *Panzer*, passed under the command of Col. von Broich, had to move up from Faïd with maneuver action, while the 21st *Panzer* would have flowed from the south-east so as to envelop and destroy the enemy forces in the area of Sidi Bou Zid.

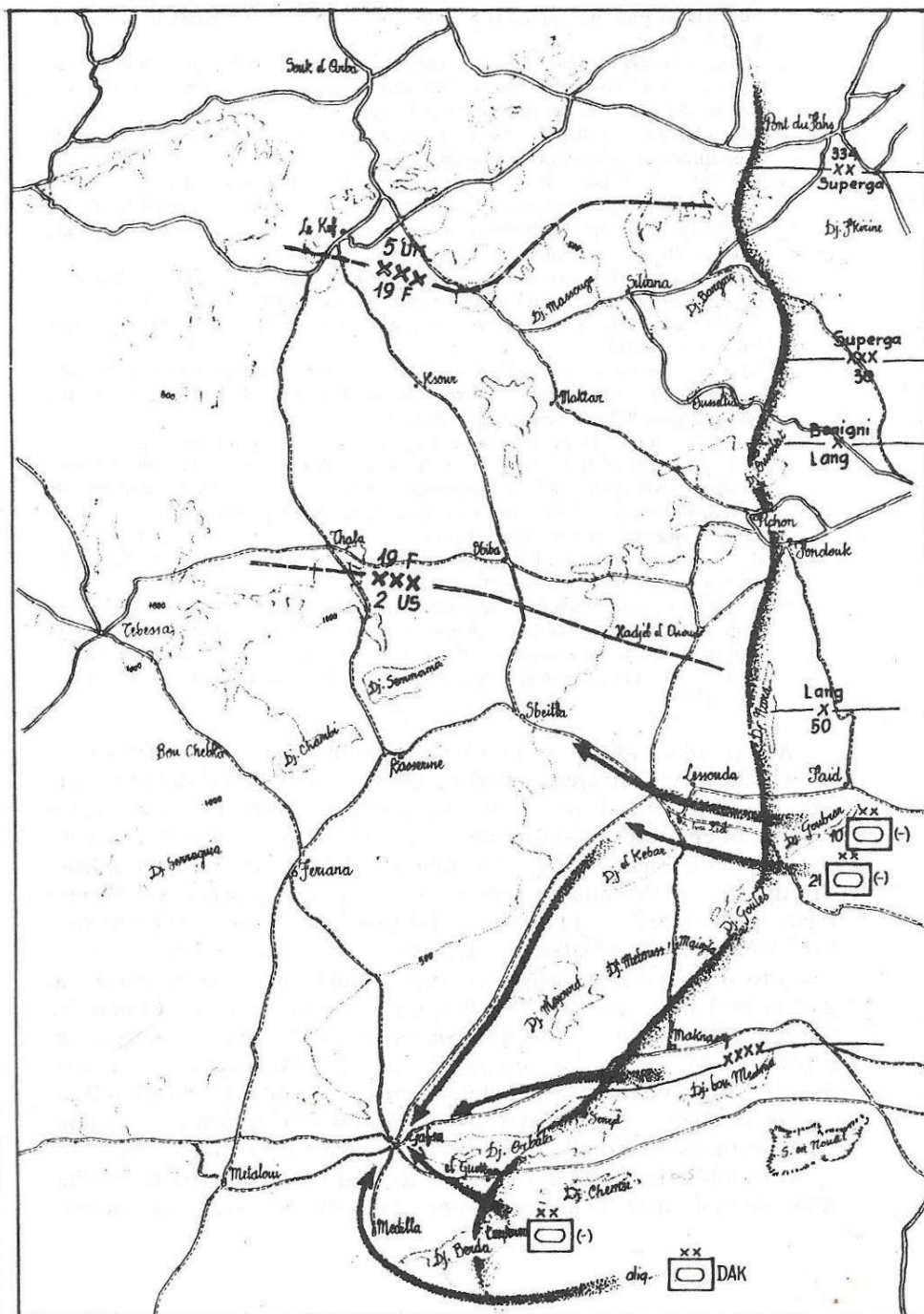
The information made unlikely that "the American army" persist in order to advance towards the East and, by contrast, seemed to indicate the retreat of its large area Sbeitla-Tebessa. Accordingly, Kesselring was convinced more and more that the campaign against the American sector, held by troops still inexperienced, did not present undue difficulty of execution and the achievement of the important rail and road junction of Tebessa, too rich depots of all kinds, it would constitute a major success and as to pave the way for developments perhaps decisive. Although in the meantime had occurred some failure on the Western Front, this would be offset by a widening victorious raid behind enemy. It was necessary, however, do not waste your precious time.

On February 10, the OBS presented, therefore, the Supreme Command of the features of the operation, which detected either desirable in the light of the changed

The plan for operations Morgenluft and Frühlingswind

Schizzo n. 42

IL DISEGNO OPERATIVO ITALO-TEDESCO PER LE
OPERAZIONI "MORGENLUFT" E "FRUEHLINGSWIND"



in the Anglo-American situation and "*keeping the spirit of the guidelines*" passed two days earlier by the Supreme Commander himself, in fact the operation was to acquire a broader:

- “1. The offensive action of the 5th Armored Army prepared to beat the enemy forces in the area So Bou Zid [= Sidi Bou Zid] should be initiated possibly on 02/12/43.
2. The Italian-German Armored Army, immediately following the above action (beginning possibly 2/15), must pincer attack on Gafsa annihilating the enemy forces located there.
- Guaranteed the basin of Gafsa, the attack must be continued against Tozeur to reach safely to the west.
3. For the attack on Gafsa will be made available from the Italian-German Armored Army a mobile combat group the part of the 5th Armored Army. The army govern directly regards strength and use of said combat group.
4. The German-Italian Armored Army will decide whether fighting a rearguard must be further conducted actively against the English 8th Army. Correspondingly must be measured the forces that will be removed by the action of Gafsa.
5. The tactical situation will decide on a further continuation of operations in the area of Gafsa. The supply of said area must be made, however, in such a way as to enable further operations.
6. Then, after the conclusion of the operations, they must make safe the conquered areas, non-mobile forces and withdraw from the front of the mobile forces; these will be set up again, behind the line of Mareth and the left side of the 5th Armored Army, the mobile reserves which must be reorganized by all means.
7. The *Fliegerkorps* Tunis has the task of supporting with conscious limitations, the planned military operations in other sectors.
8. The Commander of the 5th Armored Army, after the execution of operations established, you have to put in a position to disrupt profoundly in its development, with strong strokes on the right wing, making the enemy that there is manifest; these shots must aim the annihilation of the individual enemy groups " ⁽⁹⁾

Ambrosio fully shared the views of Kesselring and the new directives retraced almost faithfully the concepts above, with the exception of "*decisive importance*" attributed to the fact that the fighting the rearguard of the ACIT continue actively ⁽¹⁰⁾, affects, among other things, emphasized that the action to Sidi Bou Zid had "*possibly*" start on the 12th, that is, the next day, and that decisions about the goal of Tebessa would be taken after the occupation of Gafsa and on the basis of local situation, and also deserves a prominent increasingly clear impression: the reins of the war in Tunisia appeared in German hands, not of the Comando Supremo, one hand Kesselring, albeit tactfully suggested and proposed, intervened and stimulated; and the other the OKW, while significantly distracted by the events of the Russian front, on the practical level it ended up reserving the ultimate decisions, much depended also the strange reticence hitherto shown in terms of a single command,

On February 12, Ambrosio received Kesselring and Warlimont, just returned from Africa, On that occasion, he asked if they had already been given

orders for *Morgentift* and *Früblingswind* and Kesselring was to notify referring of the two operations: the first, of Sidi Bou Zid, had been moved to the 16th and the other, of Gafsa to the 19th. All in all, was renewed confirmation that the fighting in Tunisia they could not be coordinated by Rome. Ambrosio, he had long been convinced and resented the delay in resolving the issue of command, the more he intended to entrust his constituting control of the Army Group "*Further guidance for the subsequent development of the action and it also depending on the results of operations of Faïd and Gafsa.*" He asked, therefore, news about. Warlimont hastened to ensure that the development of the new organ to proceeded expeditiously as it related to home and to the broadcasting system.

Regarding the commander to be appointed, there were no doubts now about the person on whom would fall the choice. On January 26, Hitler had informed Kesselring - and the message was duly intercepted by the Allies -that "*the unified command of the two armies is essential and should be taken from one of the two commanders, as Rommel is sick, this may be just Colonel-General von Arnim*" ⁽¹¹⁾. The real stumbling block was precisely Rommel, that could not be dismissed abruptly. However Kesselring overreached, "*not just over the operation of Gafsa*" von Arnim he took office, leaving the 5th Army to Gen. von Vaerst ⁽¹²⁾.

One might argue that it does not seem very logical to pass the desired continuation of the offensive of Tebessa in hands other than those that had begun, but it should be noted that part of the Italian and German military leaders fed considerable doubt on the hypothesis so favorable.

Even in aviation the command organization was very slowly complementing. The Air Force Command Tunisia, made on January 6 to act in favor of 5th Army, albeit with very limited forces - had only 6th fighter group (two squadrons of Mc.202), the 368th squadron of G.50 and the 380th squadron of Mc.200 - initially coexisted with the 5th Air Fleet, when this last week of January brought the airports in the area of Medenine-Gabes and continued to support the ACIT. Evidently it was not the best solution. The first had very little autonomy and depended on the technical-logistics from Air Force Command Sicily. The second was "a organization stricken with elephantiasis - Gen. Santoro had to observe - which needed a profound and rapid surgical operation. The process of its heaviness, due to the width of the area in which the unit was previously deployed and the fact that much of the organization on the ground and, by fixed character had never moved from the area of Tripoli, turned more serious with the transfer to Tunisia. It was therefore to provide for one thing, by all means possible, to prompt repatriation of a mass of more than 3,000 people, including many militarized workers, who had no organic aspect, which for food difficulties

and, for disciplinary reasons, moral and hygienic, it was urgent to evacuate quickly to Italy"⁽¹³⁾.

The first of February, much of this staff was evacuated, but it was necessary to review the entire structural setting, especially as the Germans did the same. The new system went into operation in mid-February. On the 11th was constituted the *Fliegerkolps Tunis* (Gen. Seidemann), framed in the 2nd *Luftflotte*, from which depended the *Fliegerführer 2* based in Tunis and *Fliegerführer 3* based in Gabes. On the 15 was dissolved the Aeronautics Command Tunisia, absorbed by the 5th air fleet command (Gen. Bernasconi), depending directly from the General Staff of the R. Aeronautics and divided into two sectors, North and South, corresponding to the two armies.

Whenever the circumstances had requested the meeting of the Axis air forces of the two parts for certain operating requirements, the tactical command would be taken from the 5th Fleet. Which, of course, will never happen.

The instructions given to General Bernasconi and Seidemann, respectively Fougier and Kesselring were almost identical: to support ground operations in Tunisia, attack maritime traffic ally intended to supply the units of the 8th Army and, protection of maritime and aerial traffic between Sicily and Tunisia. "As if this were not enough for the weak air forces of the Axis -Commented again Gen Santoro -in consequence of operational guidelines set by the Comando Supremo, the German guidelines prescribed aviation also the task to *"supervise all locations where it is possible to prepare for any actions landing in Sardinia, Rhodes, etc. These places, a Once identified, they will be bombed until their complete destruction."* While the Italian directives prescribed even *"be ready in power to tear to pieces attempts at landing the enemy in the various theaters of war in the Mediterranean: Sardinia, Corsica, Sicily, southern France, the Italian peninsula, Greece, Dodecanese"*. To the same commands that were to enact these directives tasks prescribed they seemed so disproportionate to the availability of forces, that the German guidelines concluded: *"It is asked of Aviation personnel maximum efficiency: the personnel will be employed up to five or six times a day"*. And the Italian, a little more realistically: *"The personnel is called to intense activity, which will require even more shares per day"* ⁽¹⁴⁾.

To give an idea of the agonizing over by the General Staff in the search for any cue likely to improve the strategic situation, it is nice episode. On 7 February Gen. Ilari, Deputy Chief of of the G.S. of the Air Force, chaired a meeting extremely reserved, which had been called the most qualified experts in the field of aeronautical engineering. It came to discussing an exceptional operation: a raid on ... New York! In a sense, the initiative had a character, as it were competitive, having learned that the R. Marina was changing one of the submarine base

in Bordeaux, so as to make it suitable to carry across the Atlantic a midget submarine, which then would enter the harbor of the great American metropolis.

In that meeting he was chosen the unit, a prototype four-engine seaplane Cant. Z 511, which would have to land in the Atlantic to be refueled by a submarine. At the end, Ilari informed Fougier who traveled to the palazzo Venezia to explain the project. Mussolini approved, pleased, but forbade the throwing of bombs, preferring a gesture to D'Annunzio, with a shower of leaflets. Fougier said that one bomb would have caused huge impression on Manhattan and Roosevelt ... who knows? But Mussolini interrupted him: "*Sure would give him a good reason to raze to the ground in a week Rome, Naples, Milan, Turin and Genoa.*" Thus he nipped in the bud an enterprise certainly out of the ordinary⁽¹⁵⁾.

Regardless of fantasies, there was the huge problem of supplies. Von Arnim had come to envisage the figure of 150,000 tons per month for the needs of the Axis troops and the civilian population. The calculation would allow both ordinary supplies, and those extraordinary for reconditioning of the divisions and the establishment of a limited, but effective dropped. Kesselring it saw no chance of being requested, and, in agreement with Warlimont, he had reduced the amount to 90,000 tons, but as a minimum level. Ambrosio showed even more dramatic: even without taking into account the 150,000 tons in Italy absolutely unattainable, in his view could be transported by sea and air transport 80,000 tons. The insuperable difficulty was posed by the lack of means for naval escorts.

On February 14, Kesselring and Warlimont traveled to Rastenburg. The report prepared by Warlimont recently granted in hopes of decisive successes. According to the summary reported by *Kriegstagebuch* OKW, the situation of the Axis in Tunisia he could be considered "*similar to that of a house of cards*" in all likelihood, in mid-March, the Allies would be in position to launch an concentric offensive from the west and from the south and, despite the ability of the leaders and the fighting spirit of the troops, the two Italian-German armies would not stand the test if not replenished promptly by numerous reinforcements and large quantities of materials and resources. The Italians had little to rely so poorly armed and worse equipped. Only comfort was the relationship between the opposing air forces currently satisfactory, but no one knew how long. Moreover, the logistics situation looked steadily worsening. In conclusion, Warlimont proposed to put to Kesselring some precise questions, such as:

- "- If the operation of Tebessa should still be carried out, by accepting some risk, to improve substantially the overall situation;
- What are your proposals to defend with success a bridgehead, even smaller than the one currently occupied. "

The second question is well put in evidence the lack of trust of Warlimont on a favorable outcome of the offensive in the direction of Tebessa.

However, he failed to report that a very limited summary results of his mission to the Führer. He was received the same evening arrival, because Hitler on the morning of the following day, February 15, went by plane to the Ukraine. "At his exhibition - still shows the *Kriegstagebuch* - attended by the Commander in Chief South, Field Marshal Kesselring, who judges the situation more favorably, especially with regard to the offensive capabilities and logistics. It is therefore once again confirmed orders for the conduct and scope of the attack to be carried out to the east of Tebessa." It could not be otherwise: just the 14th the Red Army had taken Rostov. It is therefore understandable that Hitler, a distracted listener and worried about the serious threat in terms of Kharkov, preferred to believe those who offered him some hope. Because Kesselring had made the long trip just to support his beliefs, it is astonished that there is an absolute silence in the memoir of Field Marshal on the incident and weight and overlaid on the transaction.

Meanwhile, in the afternoon of the 13th, they had met Rommel, von Arnim, Ziegler, Seidemann and the commanders of the 10th and 21st *Panzer*, to define the methods of *Frühlingswind*.

The slow restructuring of command of the Axis in Tunisia, landings of fresh troops, announced the arrival of the *Hermann Goering* and the 999th *Afrika* brigade, the 80,000 tons of monthly requirement and the minimum real scarce availability of food, ammunition and fuel, were all matters on which daily *Ultra* ... referring to the Command-in-chief ally. "From the end of December [the service number] decrypts the messages almost every day, so as to provide a continuous appreciation of the logistical situation" ⁽¹⁶⁾.

So they met the planned changes of commander, Rommel's refusal to leave the ACIT, the movement of *Panzerdivisionen*, the throw-in relative efficiency of the 21st *Panzer*. At the end of January is considered in Tunisia 75,400 Germans and 13 February, on the eve of the offensive the Axis, the 5th Armored Army was assessed on 110,000 men, including 33,000 Italians and 20,000 soldiers of the *Luftwaffe* and the *Kriegsmarine*. Extent of tanks available, albeit with some uncertainty estimates indicated 183 German tanks of various types and the *Tiger*. It was known that the OKW in the coming months would intensify the sending of this type of medium, and the new *Panther*, but even that had expressed considerable dissatisfaction with the incomplete crew training.

Of the operating design von Arnim and Rommel, however, the Allies were not obtaining a clear picture. A first mention was incorporated on January 28 from the decryption of a telegram of Kesselring on the 24th. He said, in essence, that the Axis had to regain the initiative as soon as possible, attacking in direction of

Tebessa with the left wing of the 5th Army and with armored troops of the ACIT, subject to the requirement for it to crush any attempt of the British 8th Army to interfere with the maneuver. On the 30th were intercepted two other communications. The first, of the 5th Army, said that two armored divisions were not enough for the enterprise to Tebessa and that, in any case, although it considered sufficient for a move against the basin of Gafsa, were not available: the 10th *Panzer* because not able to disengage from the northern front and 21st because not ready yet. The second message, from the *Fliegerkorps Tunis*, was explicit about the many doubts that Rommel would have nourished about an attack on Gafsa.

However in the first fortnight of February, a series of bad coincidences and organizational difficulties did not allow regular interception, with the result that on certain issues the Allies gained a wealth of detail on many others far less. For example, the day of the 10th from a dispatch *Fliegerkorps Tunis* the previous day provided details on operation *Kuckucksei*, but then slipped it aside, so that was held only temporarily interrupted to resume in all probability on the 10th, starting from the area of Kairouan .

Even the intention to occupy Gafsa Commands allies received information often discordant. Until the 14th Eisenhower and Anderson were led to combine and overlay mode known to them the different operations. Suffice it to say that the discontinuity of intercepting *Enigma* messages was compounded by the difficulty of the allied air reconnaissance in part to the effective contrast operated by Axis fighters, partly because of the persistent bad weather. This explains how certain decryption outlining an offensive of Tebessa were considered less symptomatic than refuting the general opinion about the impossibility of an operation Italian-German wide-ranging because of the shortage of ammunition and fuel.

As mentioned previously, the British 1st army was reorganized with three areas of Corps. North the English 5th Corp fielded the 46th Inf. Div., the 78th Inf. Div. and the 6th Arm. Div., all in mixed constitution. The reserve was limited to the 18th Infantry (minus one battalion) in the process of catching up to the American 1st Inf. Div. and the 34th Inf. Div., also a mixed constitution and moreover incomplete a regiment of each being with 2nd Corp. In sector reserve *Combat Command B* of the 1st Arm. Div.. To the south there was the American 2nd Corp with the division of Constantine, the 1st Arm. Div. (Minus the quoted *Combat Command B* but with much of the 168th Infantry) and 26th infantry. In reserves *Combat Command D*.

One look at the context of the battle (see table on the next page) is enough to show what mixing units in the war events had brought. It demanded the recovery by Allfrey, Koeltz Fredendall and units of the respective nationality to reconcile, as far as possible, the homogeneity of the divisions.

ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE BRITISH 1 ST ARMY ON THE DATE OF 13 FEBRUARY	
5 th British Corp (Gen. Charles W. Allfrey) consisting of:	
46 th Inf. Div. (Gen. H.A. Freeman-Attwod) with:	
128 th Inf. Bd. (Gen. M.a. James)	
139 th Inf. Bd. (Gen. A.R. Chichester-Constable)	
1 st Commandos	
two French battalions	
78 th Inf. Div. (Gen. Vivian Eveleigh) with:	
11 th Inf. Bd. (Gen. E.E. Cass)	
138 th Inf. Bd. (Gen. G.P. Harding)	
five French battalions	
6 th Commando	
6 th Arm. Div. (Gen. F. Charles Keightley) with:	
26 th Arm. Bd. (Gen. C.A.L. Dunphie)	
38 th Inf. Bd. (Gen. N. Russell)	
1 st Para. Bd. (Gen. E. W. C. Flavell) with three French Battalions.	
reserve of the army corps:	
18 th Regimental combat team of the 1 st Inf. Div. (*)	
19 th French Corp. (Gen. Louis Koeltz) consisting of:	
Division of Morocco (Gen. Mathenet) with:	
36 th Inf. Bd. (Gen. B. Howlett) with four French Battalions.	
a regimental grouping of Morocco	
1 st Inf. Div. U.S. (Gen. Terry Allen) with:	
16 th regimental combat group	
a regimental grouping of Algeria	
34 th Inf. Div. U.S. (Gen. Charles W. Ryder) with:	
133 rd regimental combat group (in arrival)	
135 th regimental combat team	
reserve of the army corps:	
<i>Combat Command B</i> (Gen. Paul Mc D. Robinett)	
2 nd American Corp (Gen. Lloyd R. Fredendall) consisting of:	
Division of Constantine (Gen. Joseph Welvert) with:	
regimental combat group Schwartz	
regimental combat group Morlière	
regimental combat group...	
Light Mech. Bd. (Gen St. Didier)	
1 st U.S. Arm. Div. (Gen Orlando Ward) with:	
<i>Combat Command A</i> (Gen. Raymond Mc Quillin)	
<i>Combat Command C</i> (Col. Robert Stack)	
168 th regimental combat team of the 34 th Inf. Div.	
26 th regimental combat team of the 1 st Inf. Div.	
Army Reserve:	
1 st Guards Bd. (Gen. R.A. V. Copland-Griffiths).	

(*) The American Infantry Division, whether ternary, consisted normally for use with three *Regimental Combat Teams*. The regimental combat group was essentially a numerous grouping based on an infantry regiment, which took the indicative. For reasons of simplicity and to avoid confusion between the different types of "groups" and "regimental groups", in the text we will refer to only the base infantry regiment.

Except that the enterprise was left in agreements and at the appropriate time, ie as soon as the arrival of new British and American divisions had allowed a replacement and a recovery in the chain, which was not feasible in the first fortnight of February.

The day of the 11th the English 8th Army passed under Eisenhower, as the first act of the constitution of the 18th Army Group, whose command had to be taken by Gen. Alexander under the date of 20 February ⁽¹⁷⁾.

The Supreme Allied Commander had formed the belief that the German offensive would come from Fondouk. Eisenhower had accepted the provision of the information service, but his fears also covered the possibility of a vigorous Axis push in the direction of Gafsa. Among other things, they had received vague rumors but significant mutual antipathy between the generals Fredendall and Ward.

Anything but quiet about the solidity of the front of the 2nd Corp, shortly after midnight on the 12th sailed from Algiers willing to spend a week in the area. He arrived with Anderson at the headquarters of Fredendall in the afternoon of the next day and learned that according to *Ultra* the 21st *Panzer* was moving and the day after the 5th Armored Army would attack. Where, however, was unknown.

Eisenhower shared the instructions given by Anderson were -he said - "*the best that could be issued in anticipation of the development of an attack and taking into account the great advantage of being able to keep, if possible, the advanced positions*" ⁽¹⁸⁾. However, the immediate inspection tour had left him with a bitter taste in the mouth:

"I found a lot of disturbing things. The first was a certain laxity shown by an irresponsible delay when preparing defensive positions of the passes. The responsibility fell on the lack of experience and training of the commanders. At a point where the fields had not yet been undermined he found himself the excuse that the infantry defense had stopped in that area only two days (...). But the most serious thing was that the first armored division U.S. It was still not concentrated in order to be employed as a unit (...). As a result, the 1st Armored Division commander, Major General Orlando Ward, had nothing under his command, except small detachments of light tanks" ⁽¹⁹⁾.

Apart from the *atmosphere*, in fact, the device could not be considered likely to reassure. Deployment itself was not even appropriate to speak, given the fragmentation of the battlegroups placed on the reputed most important or dangerous points. The crux of the defense consisted of the *Combat Command A* (Gen. McQuillin), reinforced by the 168th Infantry, placed in defense of the positions of Sidi Bou Zid against the new outlets from Faid, from Ain Rebaou and the pass of Maizila. Further back were placed the French Light Mechanized Brigade reinforced (north) and *Combat Command C* (north-west), ie the estimated location most convenient for a immediate reaction against the attack of the 10th *Panzer* from Fondouk towards Pichon-Ousseltia.

In the area of Sbeitla were located the small reserve of the 1st Arm. Div. and the French Schwartz grouping, the front replaced by Americans in the line. The entire span of Sbeitla in Kasserine, Gafsa and by Feriana until El Guettar was guarded by detachments in charge of curbing a possible Italian-German breakout. Positions around Gafsa were entrusted to a robust set of Franco-American forces, but the location was not to be the outer defense: in case of excessive enemy pressure the units would be withdrawn back towards Feriana where was the I/168th Inf .. From Feriana, precisely, Fredendall reserved the right to intervene with counterattacks. Since, however, he considered the most dangerous stretch in front of Faïd, on February 11, had seen fit to dwell on the subject with a rather detailed order.

However, he had already taken root the belief that the main effort of the German offensive would come from Fondouk - why Anderson had blocked a good third of the 1st Arm. Div. in the French sector⁽²⁰⁾ - and that a move against Sidi Bou Zid not represent that a diversion. "In the morning of the 14th reports they were presented to General Anderson frequently - Eisenhower recalled - and, as it was known then, very careful about the power and direction of the German attack through Faïd, but these reports were considered by the information service of the army [= the 1st Army] and AFHQ [= *Allied Forces Head Quarter*] as exaggerations of inexperienced chaplains" ⁽²¹⁾.

2. THE BATTLE OF KASSERINE (February 19 to 22).

The Battle of Kasserine is of particular character in the Tunisian campaign. In theory constitutes the first phase of the maneuver on interior lines against the British 1st and 8th Armies. In reality, things are quite different. The initial enthusiasm of Rommel had quickly switched to growing uncertainties, not so much on the operational concept - as in this existed general agreement of views - on how effective capacity to carry out an operation of such importance. Not for nothing, while the first direction and the overall responsibility had been considered the preserve of Rommel, then when it came to planning for *Frühlingswind* and *Morgenluft* will eventually accept the two actions as distinct from each other (if not ends in same), and under the guidance of their army leaders. The "after", more or less everyone was agreed to reserve the decision following a brief examination of the situation created. In principle, Kesselring and Rommel showed themselves inclined to exploit a local success to proceed on Tebessa, von Arnim would instead willingly accommodated the consolidation of positions on the Eastern Dorsale:

for him the solution was to be found in northern Tunisia.

We will therefore examine the succession of individual acts which if unleashed an offensive with superior forces would really lead to a serious setback for the Allies. But the Italian-German units were too weak.

OPERATION FRÜHLINGSWIND (February 14 to 15).

What in your order of operations of 11 February Fredendall had very improperly called the "Faid position" covered a stretch in front of about 25 kilometers as the crow flies and was supported on Djebel Lessouda and Djebel Ksaira, key points specified elsewhere by Gen. Ward to a static defense against outlets from the passes of Faid and Ain Rebaou (sketch n. 43). The first was entrusted to the *Lessouda Force*, a tactical group set up with the II/168th Infantry⁽²²⁾; the second, to another tactical group, set to the III/168th Infantry⁽²³⁾. A third tactical group, minor, defended the position of Garet el Hadid, along with the Djebel Ksaira, it barred the way to the origins by the pass of Maizila. The entire span from Djebel Lessouda in Garet el Hadid was protected from the 81st scout battalion, responsible for organizing a sort of elastic safety zone.

In the central area, near the village of Sidi Bou Zid, Gen. McQuillin had placed the III/1st Tank (less a company) and deployed the 91st S.P. Bn. of 105/22 and the II/17th Artillery with 155 howitzers astride the track of Sidi Bou Zid-Djebel Ksaira. At Sbeitla - where Ward had placed the headquarters of the 1st Arm. Div. - was the divisional reserve, ie the I/6th Arm. Inf., however, already assigned to *Combat Command A*, the I/3rd Tank with *Stuarts* and a company of M.10 destroyers. Furthermore, as already said, where was gathered the French Schwartz grouping.

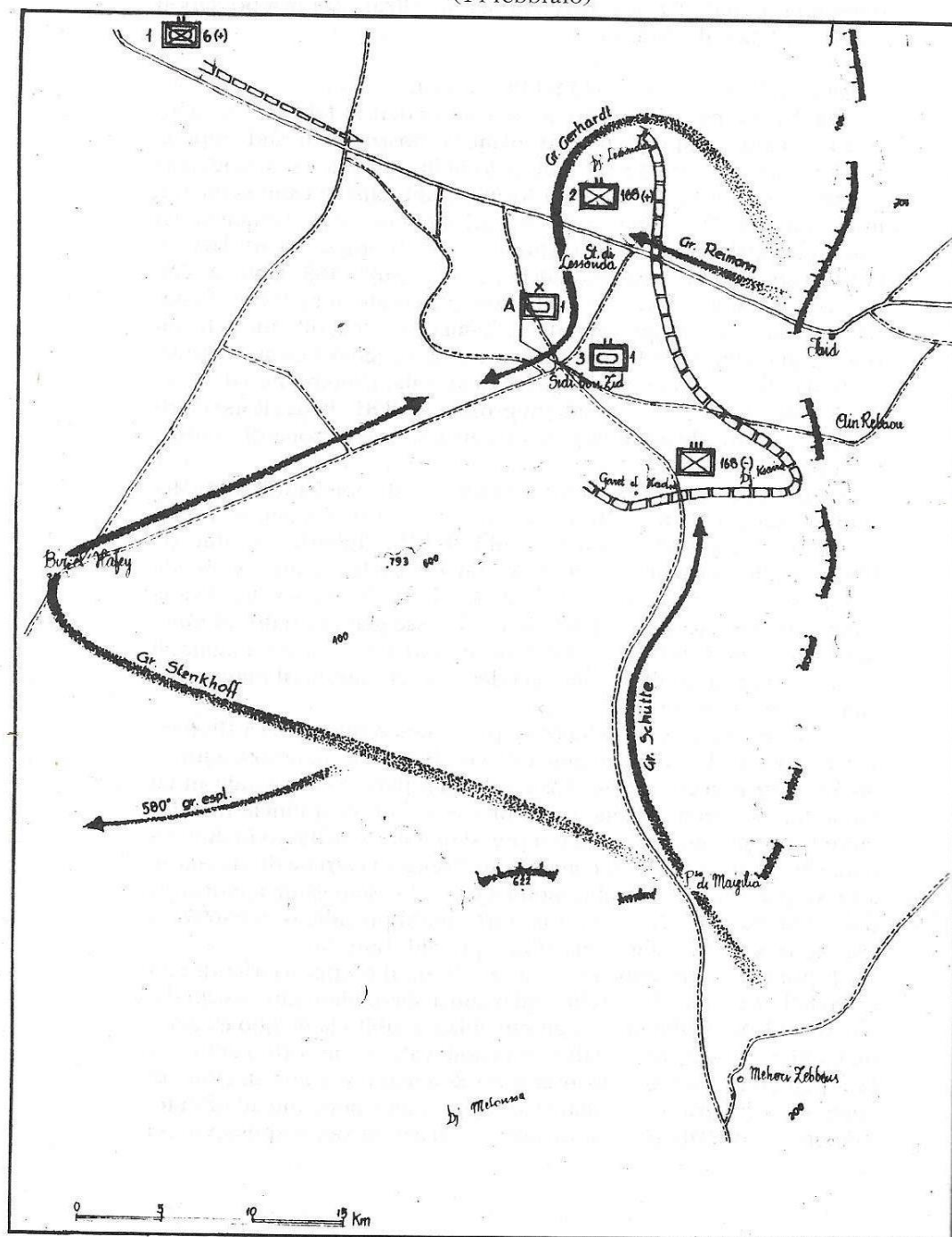
At dawn on Sunday, February 14 began the German attack. The 10th *Panzer*, now controlled by the new General von Broich, had stationed until the night before in the area of Kairouan, thus confirming the Allied bias of a next attack on Pinchon, and during the night had moved to near Faid. It was articulated in two columns: the Gerhardt group, with about forty medium tanks, set about turning Djebel Lessouda; the Reinmann group, supported by the infantry of the 21st *Panzer* in place as the garrison of Faid pass, attacked instead straddling the road to Sidi Bou Zid.

The first clash took place at 06:30 by the Gerhardt group and tanks of the *Lessouda Force* who went to oversee the outlets from the pass of Faid. Of course the Germans quickly got the upper hand and the action continued in a whirlwind of sand lifted by a strong wind. But it was without a story: at 09:00 about the Reinmann group was at the Lessouda station and the Gerhardt group joined him a little more to the east. Now the 10th *Panzer* had a point to the heart of the positions of

The operation Frühlingswind (14 February)

Schizzo n. 43

L'OPERAZIONE "FRUEHLINGSWIND"
(14 febbraio)



Combat Command A. A counterattack by the III/1st Tank resulted in a reverse; while Axis aviation was thrown on the area and in particular on the deployment of the American artillery. McQuillin then asked to withdraw his entire unit to prevent the encirclement and annihilation.

Meanwhile, the 21st *Panzer*, also divided into two groups, had exceeded the pace of Maizila. His overall strength was roughly equal to half of the 10th and put in the line just fifty tanks. The Schutte group went immediately to the north, however, hampered by Allied air attacks and by a sand storm, not made contact with the American III/168th Inf. until around noon. The Stenkhoﬀ group, however, life was easier: soon detached the 580th Recon Bn on the side exposed and at 12:30 reached Bir el Hafey, where it acted as a barrier against forces coming from Gafsa.

At Sbeitla it was hard to understand what was happening, and then no one suspected the presence of the 10th *Panzer*. At the end of the morning Ward knew that the III/1st Tank had already lost half of its means, that the garrison of Djebel Lessouda was surrounded and those of Djebel Ksaira and Garet el Hadid were left to themselves, and from the north He loomed another grave threat. Then he realized that things had turned out very badly. Fredendall, immediately informed of the events, it was decided with great reluctance to allow the abandonment of Sidi Bou Zid, but ordered him to leave in place the three Djebel units, in view of a counterattack in which he intended to restore the situation.

Ward, for his part, sent the I/6th Arm. Inf., reinforced by a company of *Stuarts*, at the junction to the north-east of Djebel Hamra, to form a line of containment to the shelter where they could regroup the battered troops.

The time flew and the 21st *Panzer* was working hard. At 17:00 the Stenkhoﬀ group made contact with elements of the 10th *Panzer* southwest of Sidi Bou Zid. That evening Ward could finally make the account of what remained of the *Combat Command* of McQuillin of the two tactical groups of the 168th Inf., isolated, the 81st reconnaissance battalion squashed, the III/1st Tank down to just seven tanks, the two groups of artillery almost completely lost, all the rest flowed into disorder and very shaken in the area of Djebel Hamra. The initial estimate of losses was 62 officers and 1,536 enlisted men among the dead, wounded and missing ⁽²⁴⁾.

On the German side, Ziegler expressed full satisfaction. During the day he had given the progression of expected losses enemy. At 16:00 he was convinced to have fulfilled most of the task, the destruction of the American armored forces in the area of Sidi Bou Zid. Being sure that the next day the enemy would try to free the trapped detachments, he intended to wait for the move to reject it definitively. It was useless, he thought,

continue straight on Sbeitla. In the evening, according to German calculations, the final was 40 tanks, 7 half-tracks, 15 self-propelled, an antitank gun and 22 enemies vehicles among destroyed and captured. Consequently, Ziegler ordered the 10th *Panzer* push patrols north for a aggressive reconnaissance, the 21st to gather to move the next day at Gafsa, both to cede some non-motorized units for the area roundup of Sidi Bou Zid.

Shortly after noon, Ward had called in the *Combat Command C* and asked to get back the II/1st Tank part of *Combat Command B* detached to the French sector. Commanders of the 2nd Corp and the 1st Arm. Div. was far from suspecting the real force fielded by the Germans. Was not identified any unit of the 10th *Panzer* and the number of Germanic tanks, estimated between 100 and 130, which could fall in the availability of the 21st *Panzer*. If this calculation was based, the 10th *Panzer* was still in front of the 19th Corp of Koeltz and *Combat Command B* was to remain in the area.

However, since the 16th/5th Lancers was coming with the new *Sherman*, the American II/1st Tank could be returned to Ward.

Apart from that, and before he knew the size of the setback, Anderson established to proceed with the evacuation of Gafsa. He had in his head for some time. Considering the French and the Americans too weak too inexperienced to withstand a blow unleashed by the Axis, he had warned Koeltz and Fredendall to be ready to fall back on the Grande Dorsale. Here, the short length of the mountain range and its course allow a cheaper defense and protection of the southern flank of the army. On the afternoon of the 14th the the jolt of Sidi Bou Zid continued to be considered as a diversion in the area of Gafsa and everything seemed quiet, but Anderson took the ball to Eisenhower who looked forward to the convenience of take advantage of circumstances to achieve an orderly retreat in two nights : the French on the first night, the Americans second. Eisenhower approved and Fredendall received orders to fall back with the troops of Gafsa on Feriana.

That night on the 15th, then, began the evacuation. They kept moving all: French, American, Arab, soldiers and civilians. The total darkness and torrential rain quickly changed the evacuation in a confused and chaotic exodus. Under this emotional drive, to Feriana to spread disorder and even panic. Some depots were recklessly burned.

The order given by Ward to *Combat Command C* in the evening of the 14th for the counterattack was rather succinct: "*You will move towards the south to destroy with fire and maneuver, the armored forces that have threatened our position in the area of Sbeitla*". The action should also aimed at the disengagement and recovery of the 168th Infantry. A task superior in every respect, the possibilities of the combat group.

In the early hours of the 15th the column marched with II/1st Tank flanked by Tank Destroyers, the 68th Self Propelled Bn. of 105 at the center, the III/6th Arm. Inf. in line. Around 10:00 there was a first foray of *Stukas*. The losses were not heavy, but the confusion ruffled the formation. Resumed moving toward the southwest, *Combat Command C* was again messed meeting of three successive *Wadis* that allowed passage only at certain points. All under the hassle of the return of the German and Italian aircraft. The third *wadi*, at Sidi Salem, the German artillery opened fire suddenly and two armored groups simultaneously attacked from the north and south (sketch n. 44).

The II/1st Tank fights until the annihilation (only four tanks were saved), the armored infantry and two batteries were able to escape to the West, but everything happened in the greatest confusion. At 22:30 that night Ward told the Command of the 2nd Corp: "*Either we beat them, or they beat us*" (25). In two days the 1st Arm. Div. He had left on the ground 98 tanks, 57 half-tracks and 29 artillery pieces. That night 230 men of the *Lessouda Force* managed to flee furtively Djebel Lessouda and regain their lines.

OPERATION MORGENLUFT (February 15).

On the morning of the 15th, when it was known only in the extent of success in Sidi Bou Zid, started operation *Morgenluft*, but it was in the early afternoon that the action gained prominence. Since the 580th Recon Bn. north of the 21st *Panzer* descended decisively down the Sidi Bou Zid-Gafsa road; to the east the advanced elements of the *Centauro* and the *Panzergrenadiere Afrika* regiment, not encountering resistance, proceeded with increasing rapidity. Between 17:00 and 18:00 entered the abandoned Gafsa, from multiple directions. That's all.

The German-Italian success took on its full meaning only at the end of the second day of fighting, that is, in the late afternoon of the 15th. All allied commanders finally realized that the expected German offensive had begun and considered the forward thrust of aggressive Germanic recon elements, given the reputation of Rommel, a harbinger of threatening developments.

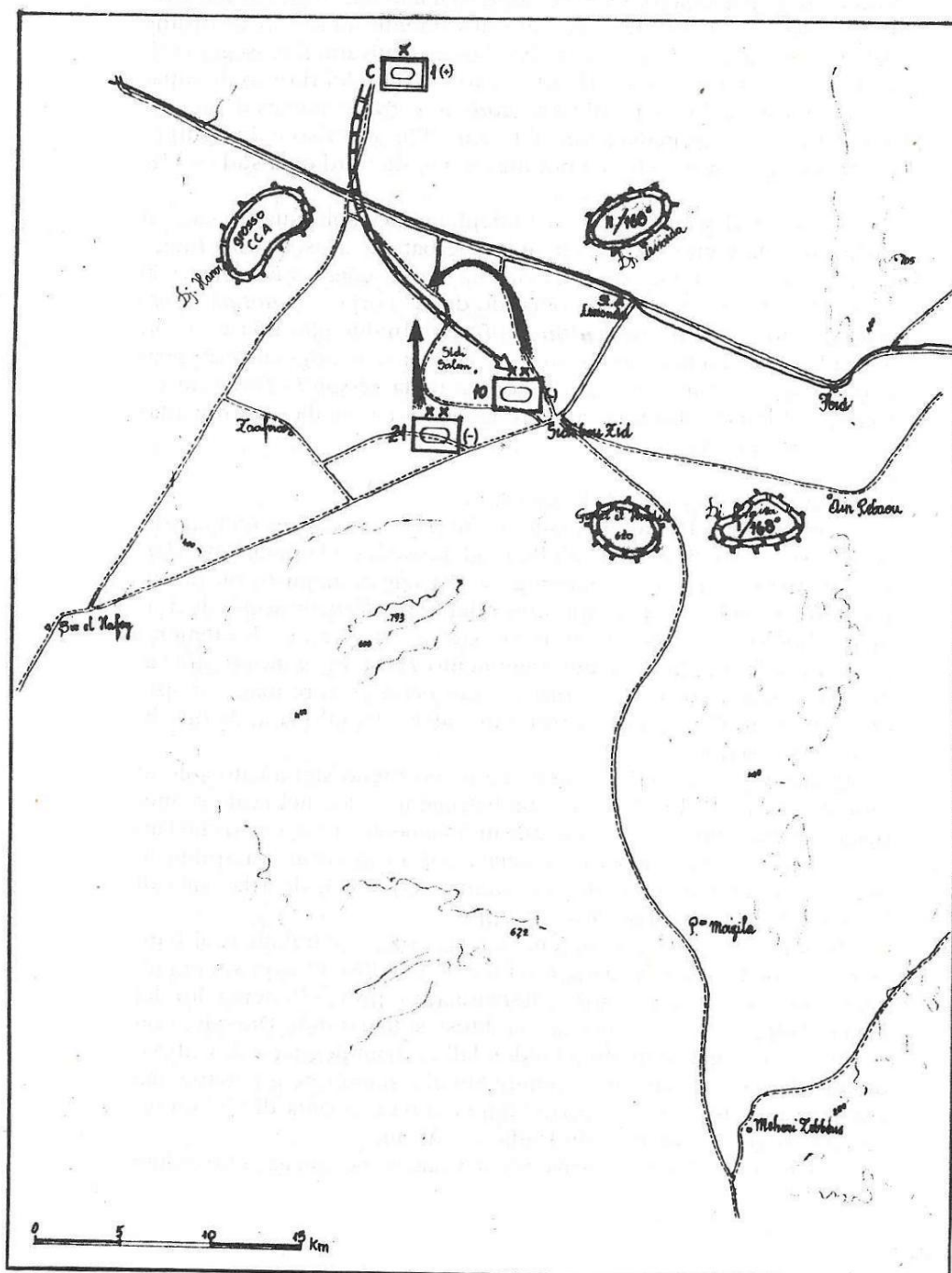
Anderson saw with extreme concern wobble the right side of his 1st Army, that side that Eisenhower had recommended making safe. Intending - prior approval of the commander in chief - to lead the defense on Grande Dorsale, not only had already ordered Fredendall to disengage from Gafsa and limiting for the moment to keep Sbeitla, Kasserine and Feriana, but it was also decided to evacuate the entire forward area of Pichon fearing a German attack on Hadjeb el Aioun.

The same evening Koeltz was summoned to the Command of the army, at Laverdure

The operation Frühlingswind (15 February)

Schizzo n. 44

L'OPERAZIONE "FRUEHLINGSWIND"
(15 febbraio)



(Eighty kilometers west of Le Kef), where he was received by the Chief of Staff with a bad prediction: the next day it could be attacked by fifty *Panzer* just spotted in the area of Kairouan. Then received by Anderson, he knew that as a result of the fighting in Sidi Bou Zid the French sector was in danger of a turning from the south and that therefore it was necessary to study the abandonment of the front of Pichon and rear of the Ousseltia plain, to move the position of resistance on the Grande Dorsale. Before the bitter consideration that very painful it would be for the French troops to leave without fighting positions whose conquest had cost blood and toil, Anderson postponed in the aftermath of the final decision. Koeltz not fooled, including a resolution already adopted and shared by Eisenhower.

Rommel and von Arnim were trying to coordinate efforts, while aiming at each follow their own inclinations. In the early hours of the 16th Ziegler pushed the Gerhardt group of the 10th *Panzer* towards Sbeitla with the intention to carry out an actual attack. But von Arnim telephoned warning that if he gave him the 21st *Panzer* he would not have been able to make the much desired inroad to Hadjeb el Aioun and beyond. Von Arnim had no hesitation: at 07:45 Rommel informed that, given the conquest of Gafsa by the DAK, it was useless to send the 21st as planned. Ziegler called immediately after ordering him to invest Sbeitla with a quick and powerful shot to destroy the Allied depots. The next day, February 17, he would turn in the direction of Pichon to eliminate the enemy forces of the sector.

Ziegler, then reworked the deployment. The 21st *Panzer* was entrusted with the task of occupying Sbeitla; the 10th, to gather in the area of Sidi Bou Zid to head the next day on Hadjeb el Aioun; non-motorized elements of the two divisions to defend the positions of Faïd passing dependency to the adjacent field Lang.

Meanwhile, Rommel had gone personally to Gafsa, where looters were Arab taking advantage of the exodus general. By a communication sent at 09:00 to the command of the 1st Army from the Italian core connection with Rommel, it would be a guidance to end of the match:

"ACIT finds it difficult to further development of operations toward Feriana, having asked the 5th Army to withdraw its forces for other needs. They would therefore maintained contacts at Feriana & the occupation of Gafsa, allocating the remaining forces to the south-east."

In line with the message, Rommel's orders that day were confined to advance von Liebenstein towards Feriana (to take it by surprise if possible) and to begin the occupation of Metloui with a German units and Tozeur with one of *Centauro*, which corresponded exactly to the intentions of Kesselring. Possession of the two places was supposed to be charged of the ACIT until the arrival of two Germans battalions of march. But at this point is

inserted Gen. Messe -which was following the events waiting to take command of the army - had appreciated substantially prone to caution: the two German battalions were small, both qualitatively and quantitatively, than the defense needs and still stable employment line Metloui - Tozeur was a burden too heavy. Moreover, his inevitably weak garrison offered the enemy a easy opportunity for coups. Ultimately, he proposed to simply hold positions in the east of Gafsa and to control the valley and the impact from the west (Metloui) and south-west (Tozeur) with mobile elements.

The Comando supremo and the OBS were in the unfortunate position of having to decide without a sound knowledge of the prospects tactics. Because von Arnim took care not to keep them current at all. The Chief of G.S. of the OBS knew only on the night of the 16th that the operation had begun. And since through the results of air reconnaissance patrols had been informed of mechanized forces towards Hadjeb el Aioun -what indicating orientations different from those of the OBS -he hastened to call Kesselring, still in Rastenburg. Field Marshal commissioned him to put pressure on the Comando supremo that he might be given immediately start to exploit the success towards Tebessa, entrusting it to Rommel. But the Comando supremo, the clear awareness not to possess the conclusive elements of judgment, he stuck to a median policy, asking the 5th Army to consider insisting in action as permitted by the circumstances and to retain the ACIT in the Metloui- Tozeur line.

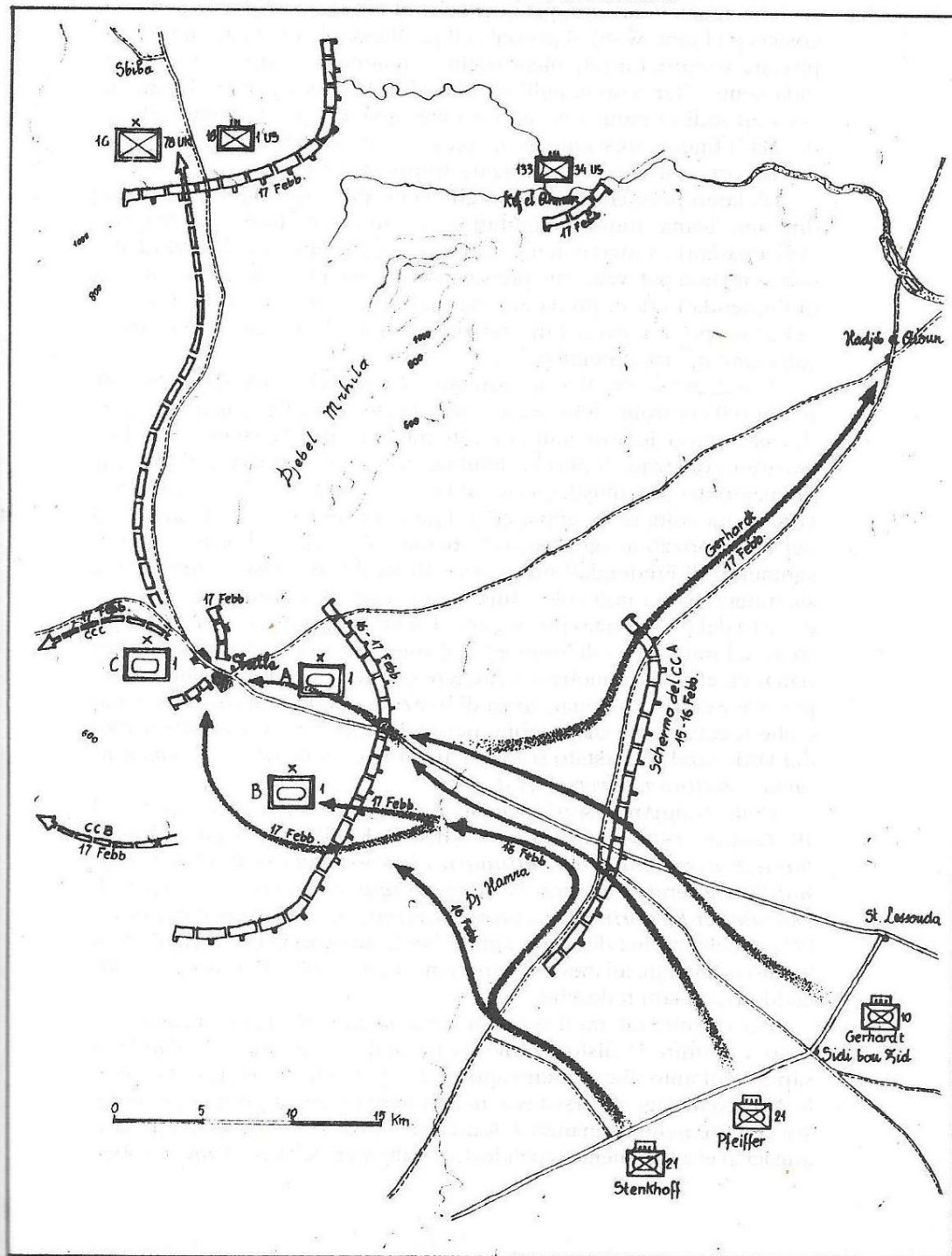
Most likely some a tendency to be satisfied with a continuation of the offensive was derived from the news of the happy outcome of a convoy to Tunisia: despite repeated attacks both air and sea that evening arrived in Tunisia five of six merchant that departed.

If by the Axis decisions were slow maturation in the day of the 16th, Anderson did not waste time and since early morning had passed the provisions for withdrawal. To the center and right of the French 19th Corp - in other words the American 1st and 34th Inf. Div., as well as the French Light Brigade Mechanized - they had to move in two nights, starting on the same 17th, the Grande Dorsale, from Djebel Bargou south. Meanwhile, to avoid worse problems resulting from the loss of Sbeitla, he commanded the English 26th Arm. Bd. rush to Sbiba where would remain until the 18th, after which he received the change of the 34th Inf. Div. and the Light Brigade.

It was soon clear that Sbeitla could appear a source of serious problems. The town was now defended by *Combat Command A*, reinforced by new elements, and *Combat Command B* (incoming), with a safety shield formed by units of *Combat Command A*, at about the height of Djebel Hamra (sketch No . 45). The Gerhardt group had soon made contact with American advanced elements,

The events of February 16 to 17

GLI AVVENIMENTI DEL 16-17 FEBBRAIO



but what for most of the day had consisted of simple reconnaissance turned in the late afternoon in a true act of force against the screen. The aforementioned Gerhardt group had added two battle groups of the 21st *Panzer*, Pfeiffer and Stenkhoﬀ, so to Gen. Ward showed the problem to face a new heavy clash. The retreat of the security echelon quickly became labored and, in the darkness, the start of Germans fire begat episodes of panic and a stream of vehicles fleeing blocked Sbeitla. But finally, the German pressure was limited, because the 21st *Panzer* did not try to force too much events.

Let's just say that, at least in the eyes of the French, the doubts on American solidity and had increased a lot. Juin that morning had a long talk with the Gen. Welvert and impressions taken from the interview could only worry him. Apparently, the command of Fredendall was in the throes of a great confusion in the rear of the 2nd Corp there were no reserves, access to Tebessa from the south was open to the enemy.

At 22:30 Gen. Ward discouraged Welvert he admitted that he had lost control of the situation and sketched to Fredendall a very bleak picture: the advanced positions overwhelmed by a large attack of German armored formations with imminent prospects dubious. Influenced by the pessimistic report, the commander of the 2nd Corp warned in turn of the crisis to Gen. Anderson, who at 01:30 of 17th authorized the eviction of Sbeitla and Feriana. Perhaps the tone of dismay Fredendall influenced in some way on this waiver, but certainly a strong push was exerted by a *Ultra* decryption of the previous afternoon. A message of the ACIT had announced plans of Rommel to direct the DAK pass Gafsa onto Feriana; another gave reason to believe that the attack of von Liebenstein could run out for lack of fuel if conducted pass Feriana, and that the fuel available for the 21st *Panzer* and the *Kampfgruppe* of DAK would have been enough just to 100-150 kilometers "*if the fighting continued westward*"⁽²⁶⁾.

However Anderson, who had gone a couple of hours later to the Command of the 19th Corps: "*Everything is for the worst - told Koeltz – from the surroundings, the 2nd Corp can not continue to fight with his tanks, since there remains nothing, we must therefore fall back on the Grande Dorsale for Kasserine which will be held until tomorrow at noon*"⁽²⁷⁾. That night the defenders of Djebel Ksaira and Garet el Hadid attempted to escape the inevitable surrender, but few will succeed and 1,400 fell into German hands.

For a long time the Allied information service could not define the exact location of the 10th and 21st *Panzer* – it only knew that they had shifted -and although the Allied Headquarters in Algiers persist in believing the German "main force" always near Kairouan, the information office of the 1st Army had finally identified a part of the 10th *Panzer* at Sbeitla.

On the 17th, however, thanks to the messages of Gen. Seidemann to Kesselring, the Allies began to get a better idea. *Ultra* that day put to current interesting news: that soon would start an operation on the direction of Feriana- Tebessa to remove Allied air bases; that units of *Fliegerkorps Tunis* were ready to support an attack on Tebessa or Le Kef, or on the front of Tunis⁽²⁸⁾.

It was enough for Anderson. Since the previous evening he had gone to Koeltz, together with the Ggen. Keightley, commander of the 6th Arm. Div., To tell him that things were bad in Sbeitla and that it was necessary to take steps to safeguard the position of Sbiba, on the Sbeitla road that leads to Le Kef. Meanwhile he had ordered that Keightley send him to the pass of Sbiba the 26th Arm. Bd., he then made inflow the 1st Guards Brigade. Koeltz then directed the 34th Inf. Div. and later also he received the 6th Arm. Div., with the specific constraint to entrust it to the new stretch of the front.

If the night's retrograde movement could begin with some regularity in the French sector, and not as just happened in the US, where it all took on the character of improvisation and confusion. At about 20:00, Gen. Welvert suddenly received orders to evacuate and move to the plateau of Bou Chebka to bar access to Tebessa. Given the time, he warned his units by phone, using turns of phrase and allusions to preserve a minimum of privacy. As the Italian troops had so often experienced, an ally well-equipped with vehicles did not meet fundamental difficulties for the transport of personnel and material, while the French "*had to make an exhausting walk a forced march through the desert, during which were forced to abandon a new number of their miserable vehicles, losing such a good ammunition, food and equipment*"⁽²⁹⁾. At the same time, the Schwartz grouping was forced to another forced march of over a hundred kilometers to go also from Sbeitla to Bou Chebka.

February 17 took place the occupation of Feriana and Sbeitla by the Axis. Early in the morning the troops of von Liebenstein set about advancing northward. The *Centauro*, a *sui generis** division because of its wide organic incompleteness was not compensated by the aggregation of various units, it is divided into three tactical groups. One of them, mechanized, was incorporated into the *Kampfgruppe* of DAK; the second, motorized, with which was placed Gen. Calvi, was in charge of the control of the basin of Gafsa; the third, on foot, remained in the El Guettar under the orders of Gen. Costa, deputy commander of the division⁽³⁰⁾.

The *Kampfgruppe* von Liebenstein now included, besides the detachment of the *Centauro*, the *Panzergranadiere Afrika*, a tank battalion of just 26 tanks, the 33rd and the 580th Recon Bn. the 71st Nebelwerfer Regiment, two field Art. groups and smaller units. A tool for fighting the consistency of which could be

*Latin meaning unique

assessed only in relation to the task entrusted to him (and for the moment seemed more than enough), whose fighting capacity was definitely very high, but the availability of artillery which could not be considered adequate.

The advance of Feriana not submitted that the difficulties enemy delaying elements; on the other hand the destruction and disruption implemented by the Americans caused a significant slowdown in the progression. The goal was reached around noon. At 14:00 it was the turn of the two airfields Thelepte, with the capture of 34 aircraft (mostly damaged), 22,000 liters of aviation fuel, 30 tons of oil and abundant amounts of food, ammunition and miscellaneous material. A quicker advance would prevent the enemy from destroying 270,000 liters of gasoline and various plants and warehouses. Among the Italian-German losses would appeared von Liebenstein, wounded by the explosion of a mine. He was replaced immediately by Gen. Bulowius, commander of enginners of the ACIT.

As for the divisions of Ziegler, it was at least to complete the success reported in Sidi Bou Zid. The morning passed in relative peace. The 10th Panzer reached easily Hadjeb el Aioun and went on the march, while the 47th *Grenadiere* frontally attacked the rearguard of the American 34th Inf. Div. in full operation of disengagement. Pichon was occupied in the afternoon.

Sbeitla things went less well, but ended with the same result. Possession of the town, which was originally to be guaranteed at least until 11:00 hours was considered too important by Anderson and Fredendall used to give it up without having the full capacity of arrest. So they tried to extend the defense for the entire day of the 17th (Feriana had to be held up to 18:00 of the same day), since it was considered sufficient forces there concentrated by Gen. Ward. Contrary to expectations, the 21st Panzer not attacked at daybreak but at the end of the morning. In just over an hour *Combat Command B* was overwhelmed and forced to retreat to the west of the town on *Combat Command C*, hitherto not engaged. *Combat Command A*, instead, moved north, on Sbiba. Fighting still continued at intervals until, around 16:00, Ward ordered the retreat on Kasserine. Shortly after the Germans entered Sbeitla and there reorganized, not bothering to chase the opponent.

With the abandonment of Sbeitla the 1st Arm. Div. concluded a brief but intensive course of four days of fighting emerged badly shaken. The 21st *Panzer* announced to have taken 2,546 prisoners and captured or destroyed 183 tanks, 280 vehicles, 18 field pieces, 3 anti-aircraft guns and one anti-tank. However it had faded the possibility of annihilating the entire division and this missed opportunity had criticized the fixed idea of von Arnim to ship to Pichon most of his armored troops.

TEBESSA or LE KEF?

It was time to make a decision leading to the turning point as impress on the operations. On the morning of the 18th passed for Rommel in a increasing racking of his brain. He wanted above all to be safe to the west. Sent recon groups across the Algerian border, ordered the move to Feriana the 7th Bersaglieri, to make contact with the 21st *Panzer* in Kasserine, secured the evacuation of the entire area to the east of the Grande Dorsale from the other side and the general retreat of the US 2nd Corp to Tebessa.

He also understood the state of nervousness of American commanders engaged for the first time on a battlefield. And he realized that the upheaval produced in the Allied south offered him the right to strike a heavy blow to the entire British 1st Army and, who knows, perhaps a reversal of the situation! He had to dare, though. The outnumbered, *Panzergruppe Afrika* of the ACIT before and after, it had always forced to face a big risk. *"But I had never played all out - he wrote in his diary with remarkable ease - and even in the most daring enterprises I had always kept his hand just enough to dominate any event, without fear of losing everything. But in circumstances where we were definitely needed to dare more "* (31).

The salient created in the Allied dispositions could point behind the enemy following three guidelines. The Sbeitla-Sbiba-Kef and Kasserine- Thala-Kef, alleging both at the same objective of about 120 km depth, and Feriana-Bou Chebka- Tebessa by any stretch of eighty kilometers. The choice was between Le Kef and Tebessa and the discourse made by Rommel tended to make a convincing "in depth" of Tebessa. Achieving this and ready projection to Bona recon groups could -at least it hoped - induce the British 1st Army to leave Tunisia. There was, it is true, the theoretical danger of a big enemy counterattack in the direction of Gafsa, but it was a unlikely eventuality because of the apparent inexperience of the enemy and still easily containable with timely blocks at some locations of forced passage.

The value of such a operational conception resided in betting on a goal definitely on the rear of the Allied front, so as to avoid the intervention of the sectoral reserves, and putting together a armored mass powerful enough to overwhelm any resistance without wasting too much time.

At 14:30 Rommel turned to the Comando Supremo and to the OBS explaining that the situation "Today" suggested an immediate attack "outflanking" of Tebessa and beyond; that such action required a robust armored grouping and supplies secured by the 5th Army; so that the 10th and 21st *Panzer* had to be placed at his disposal and immediately concentrated in Thelepte-Feriana. Mattered much, as you might guess, not only on optimism that

generally he had characterized the views of Rome, but also the inevitable desire of Mussolini and the High Commands to finally get a political-military success.

The first to answer was Kesselring, just back from East Prussia to his headquarters of Frascati:

"I consider essential – to telegraph to the two army leaders – to continue the attack in the direction of Tebessa and north, concentrating all available forces on the left wing and leveraging our recent success with a blow that might still result in serious consequences for the enemy. The above for your preliminary orientation. I'll talk to that effect with the Duce and Ambrosio today"

Rommel he was excited, feeling to have a new brilliant triumph at hand⁽³²⁾. While waiting for the official response of the *Comando Supremo*, he phoned von Arnim, who showed himself in complete disagreement. First of all he meant absolutely not to cede the 10th *Panzer* he needed it for a scheduled action in the west of Tunis. Secondly, an advanced about Tebessa in danger of falling into a dangerous isolation and, consequently, to result in a sterile (ie unnecessarily expensive) offensive effort. Instead, he noted, much more effective would be a director moved east, with objective of Le Kef. In this case, coordination between the two armies would find better explanation. Ultimately, he had no desire to venture into a dubious enterprise.

The *Comando Supremo* was examining the proposal of Rommel, arrived at 19:00. The orientation was beneficial in general terms. The success in Sbeitla and the retreat of the Allied central and southern deployment induced to attempt an operation on a larger scale "*intended to hit on the side of the enemy camp* - as Ambrosio explained to Mussolini with a threatening note -*and behind the British 5th Corp*". The danger of interference by Montgomery seemed minimal, given the difficulty of the approach of the 8th Army to the Mareth positions. In short: it was worth attacking "*while staying in a safe setting*." And this caution was expressed by the change of target: not Tebessa, but Le Kef.

You do not know the terms of the control design assessment or so it has got to choose Le Kef, but maybe a possible explanation element can grasp the fact cited by Mussolini:

"*I have arranged* - Ambrosio had written - *who to Marshal Rommel also remain the responsibility of the defense of the Mareth because he's being moved, in explanation of his offensive task, to finally commit all mobile reserves of the defense itself.*"

In other words, it was feared that Rommel throw himself headlong on Tebessa, with the unknowns of the case. Kesselring certainly expressed his substantial agreement, because the next morning he left for Tunis

with Gen. Gandin "*in order to define the details of the action on the spot.*"

Premised "*the a unique opportunity to get a decisive success in Tunisia,*" the directives issued by Ambrosio indicated the aims:

"(...) Threaten behind the British V Corps with a deep attachment to the north and possibly isolate, however, still force the enemy to the north-Tunisian border to retreat."

To this end, Rommel had "at first" thrust on Le Kef with all the mobile forces most from the ACIT the 10th and 21st *Panzer*, giving maximum safety in his left side. Von Arnim had received orders separately for the offensive between the coast and the Pont du Fahs ("on a large front "), subject to the need to disrupt the enemy and make it uncertain with frequent and ancillary actions by sea (landing in Tabarka) and sky (launch of paratroopers near Le Kef).

Rommel, who received the radio message at 01:30 of 18 February, was a huge disappointment. Target and limit access to the Le Kef represented to him "*an operational myopia that made your hair stand*" ⁽³³⁾. Yet a very respectable opponent gave him the drawing to win Le Kef:

" If it was received - Marshal Alexander wrote - to overcome our fragile defensive screen of the West Dorsale in Kasserine and Sbiba, he would not meet that many obstacles to go north; such advanced would allow him to take immediately from the rear the 19th Corp, whose units were already shaken for losses incurred in January, as the hasty abandonment of the Eastern Dorsale. And if he managed to reach Le Kef, it would arrive behind the 5th Corps. This would have unbalanced our positions in Tunisia and led to retreat if a disaster " ⁽³⁴⁾.

A comment is not easy, because it must also take into account the situation as known or suspected by allied commands and Italian and German commanders. Is inclined, however, to consider exaggerated the scope of the disappointment of Rommel: Le Kef was only given as goal "Home" (the continuation of the action would have been obviously established in relation to the development of the events, as indeed did until then); Le Kef is no farther from Bona than it is from Tebessa but, unlike the latter, allowed really the essential isolation of the British 5th Corps, which would remain the only coastal road, blockable at Tabarka. Tebessa, moreover, can not be argued that it was ignored: it was included in the first of two lines abutting indicated by the Supreme Commander (the Tebessa-Sbeitla and Tadjerouine - Maktar) and its importance, if only for safety , it was recognized by prescription to hold it firmly. And then the overall risks seemed certainly lower.

Seems much less convincing, however, the obligation of the defense of

Mareth. On balance, Rommel was about to engage in an operation considered highly relevant with three footfalls: the direct superiors who did not share, the logistics dependence on the 5th Army and concern for the southern front.

If Rommel was tenacious in his purposes, von Arnim did not remain far behind. When Kesselring landed at Tunis he found waiting the commander of 5th Armed with a memo in which the design of Rommel was bluntly criticized. It made no sense to apply the concept for the envelopment at broad range, as well as successfully accomplished in the desert, in the region of Tunisia. It had to be more realistic and bear in mind the availability of forces and time as well as distance relationships. To achieve the desired purpose it took about three weeks, and you could not deceive Montgomery conceded that this gift, once he realizing that he no longer faced the *Panzerdivisionen*. Did he therefore necessary - argued von Arnim - Change radically the plan and focus on the establishment of a reduced amplitude proportional to the effective of the two armies, that of a Tunisian bridgehead whose perimeter lean on positions naturally strong, such as the mountains of Medjerda, the area of junction of the two ridges and range of Enfidaville. Since the northern part of this weak was in Allied hands it to conquer it with an offensive which, starting from Hadjeb Aioun el-Fondouk and proceeding along the Maktar- Le Kef, he arrived on the rear of the enemy lines. It did not seem difficult, because the raid would take place in the French sector, the weakest, and because the three armored group were already detached so set: the 10th *Panzer* at Hadjeb el Aioun, the 21st at Sbeitla and the *Kampfgruppe* of DAK at Feriana. Tebessa was enough to get hold of the Kasserine Pass, blocking any attempt of that area. Of course the command of the operation would be for the commander of the 5th Army, who knew northern Tunisia⁽³⁵⁾.

Offhand Kesselring probably was stunned, then he rejected sharply the project without even discussing it.

THE BATTLE OF KASSERINE AND SBIBA (February 19 to 20).

As highly displeased, Rommel did not want to lose valuable time. To reach Le Kef had the choice between two directions: to Kasserine- Thala and to Sbiba-Ksour. He wanted to use both assigning the first to the DAK and the second to the 21st *Panzer*. The *Centauro* was to instead engage in the direction of Djebel Bou-Dernaia Chebka, as if to proceed on Tebessa, in a way to distract the attention of the enemy. The 10th *Panzer*, at the time a little too far away to play a role from the beginning, was ordered to gather in the area of Sbeitla, yes they can, depending on circumstances, act as reinforcements to the 21st *Panzer* or DAK.

On February 18 was translated into a valuable Axis gift to the British 1st Army.

In those twenty-four hours that the crisis had hit and shocked the American 2nd Corp had eased considerably. When Anderson knew that the morning was spent in substantial calm pulled a sigh of relief, even though, in truth, the relief was exaggerated because made him hope for a possible waiver of Rommel and von Arnim to continue the offensive over the Grande Dorsale, towards Le Kef or Tebessa, and even in the retreat of Rommel towards Gabes due to concerns inevitably aroused by the approach of Montgomery to the position of Mareth.

Regardless of such wishful thinking, the Allied orientations considered almost certain a Italian-German recovery effort, although the interception of messages *Enigma* in the day of the 18th had not yet allowed Anderson to give a predefined idea about the real intentions of Rommel. The threat from Kasserine was evident, especially for the ascertained presence of the 21st *Panzer* with 65 tanks efficient. Instead, it appeared, the 10th *Panzer* would not have been able to intervene in the field prior to a day or two. How was manifested such danger existed a lot of uncertainty. While the British and Americans were inclined to predict an offensive on El Kef from Sbiba or from Kasserine, the French most likely they attributed to an attempt on Tebessa.

However, on the evening of the 18th almost all the features of the front concerning them had received a more or less satisfactory arrangement (sketch n. 46). At Sbiba, whose defense had come under the responsibility of the French 149th Corp, was a large part of the British 6th Arm. Div. (Gen. Keightley) and the American 34th Inf. Div. (Gen. Ryder) and, further back, the French Light Brigade Mechanized. Less satisfactory situation remained in the American sector. To the south-eastern border of the plateau of Bou Chebka was the deployed the division of Constantine of Welvert, left somewhat at the mercy of itself ⁽³⁶⁾.

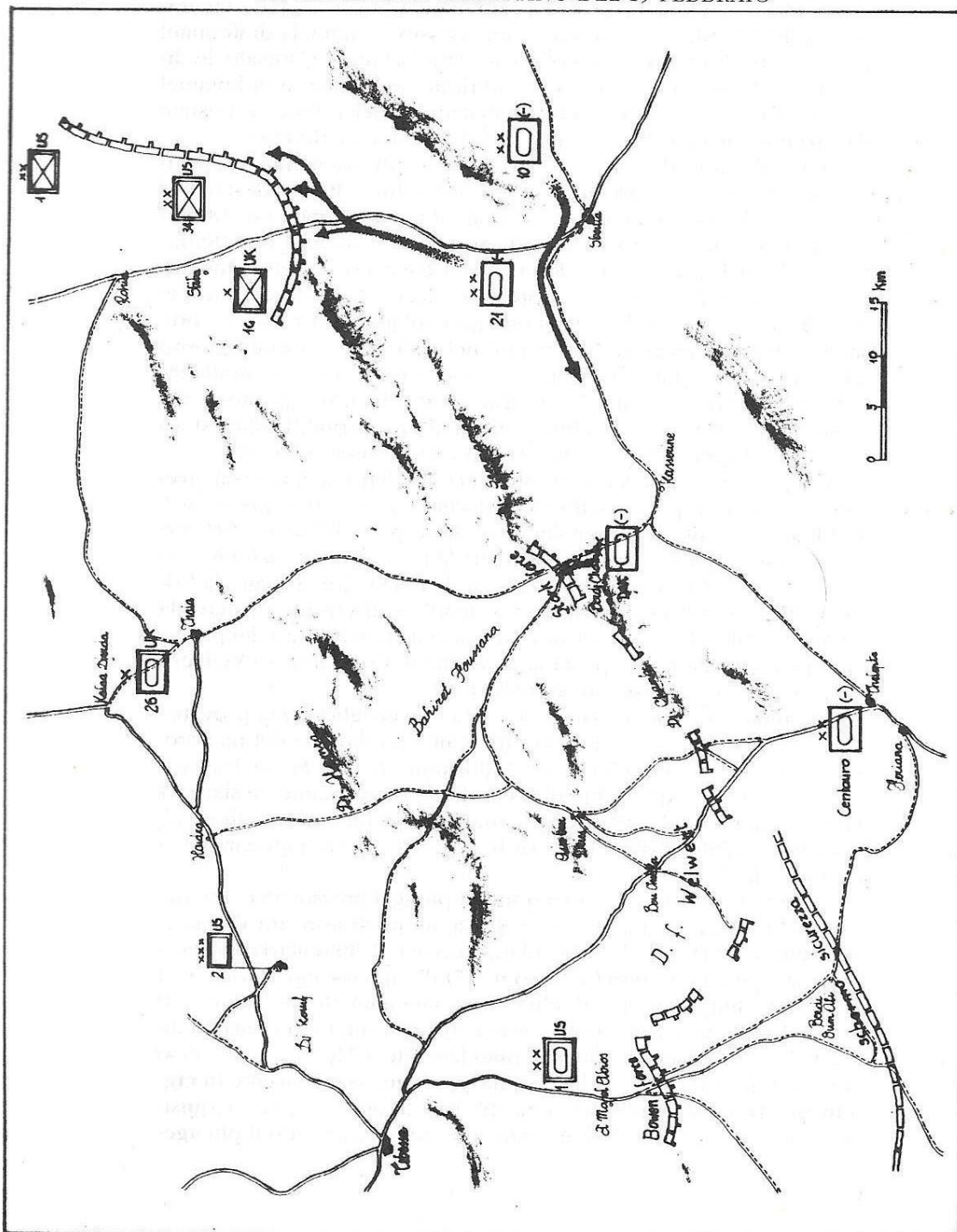
Further back, south of Tebessa, he was gathering very privately the 1st Arm. Div. of Gen. Ward. On the southern edge of the plateau, the far right of Welvert, was placed the *Bowen Force* detached from the 1st Arm. Div.. At the pass of Kasserine, then, initially barred by two battalions of the American 19th Pioneers Engineer Regiment (Col. Moore) and by the 805th Tank Destroyer Battalion, will rapidly build up *Task Force Stark*.

The morning of the 19th, after a night of almost continuous rain, the Germans attacked. The pass of Kasserine opens between the Djebel Semmama and Jebel ech Chambi, at about ten kilometers north-west from the village of the same name (sketch n. 47). It is a passage about 800 meters wide and two kilometers long, which leads into the valley of Bahiret Foussana following two tracks turning in separate directions. One to the north, adduces comfortably at Thala; the other, to the west, forks to circle the foot of the mountain, providing access to Tebessa, overcoming a bottleneck not easy acquired for those coming from Kasserine, and Haidra exploiting the easier

The situation on the morning of February 19

Schizzo n. 46

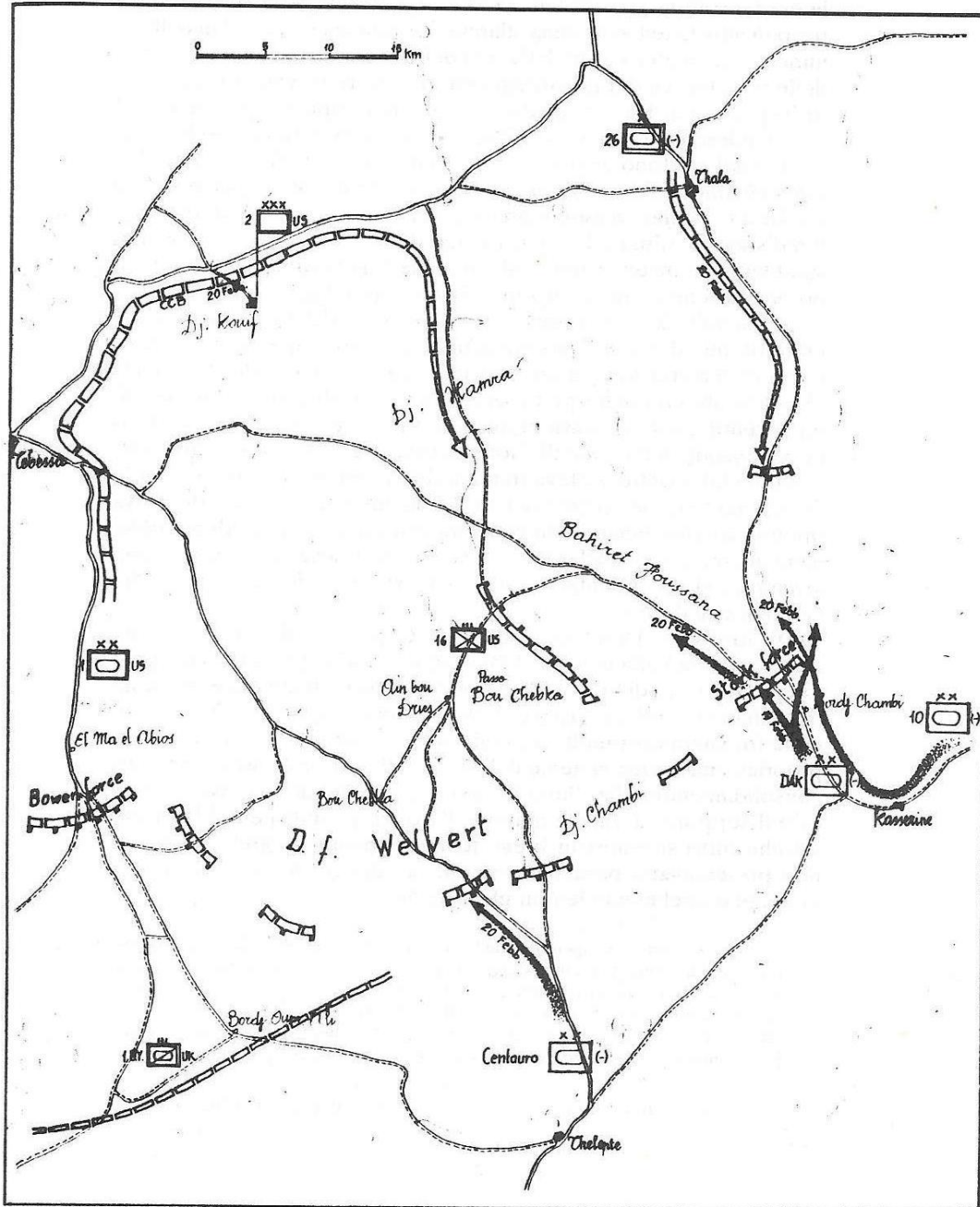
LA SITUAZIONE IL MATTINO DEL 19 FEBBRAIO



The battle of Kasserine (19-20 February)

Schizzo n. 47

IL COMBATTIMENTO DI KASSERINE
(19-20 febbraio)



furrow along which runs the narrow-gauge railway line.

The US defense was concentrated astride each of the two tracks, a few hundred meters from the entrance of the pass. At Thala had collected the bulk of the English 26th Arm. Bd. (Gen. Dunphie). A little activity German first alarmed then convinced Fredendall of imminence of an attack since the evening of the 18th. True it is that during the skirmishes in the afternoon many engineers had abandoned positions. Poorly commanded by inexperienced cadres, frightened by German fire and rumors of defeat, had lost their heads. Fredendall phoned Col. Stark, commander of the 26th Infantry, "*I want you to go immediately to the Kasserine pass to build a Jackson type fortress and you take command of the situation.*" Then he ordered the influx of the III/6th Arm. Inf. and the III/39th Inf.. Stark left with his I Battalion and arrived at the site around 07:30, of the 19th. Just in time to bear the brunt of the *Kampfgruppe* of DAK.

The German action began with an attempt of the 33rd Recon Bn. to seize by surprise the American positions. Except that a British radio interception had broadcast the alarm and the effort was rejected without much difficulty, although a worsening of nervous tension among the defenders. Stark immediately reported the incident to Fredendall. It was not quite sure of the meaning to be attributed to the clash: it could be a simple reconnaissance forces intended to identify the characteristics of the defensive structure or the preliminaries of an actual attack. Shortly after, however, the French signaled that elements of German infantry were preparing to climb on both sides of the pass. Now there was no longer any doubt.

Seen going for nothing the attempt to surprise, Bülowius had decided to throw into the fray with the *Panzergranadiere Afrika*. Menton to resolve the issue by force. The II Battalion was launched against the northern side of the pass, the Djebel Semmama, while the bulk of the formation is forwarded into the threshold. It was not the most appropriate move; but probably the desire to start the action before the consolidation of the defense meant that the *grenadiers* were missing fire support, air and artillery, indispensable. The fact is that everything ran out quickly. The few gains showed no particular tactical significance. Around 13:00 Rommel arrived and did not like what he saw:

"The trouble was - he said - that [Menton] had chosen the wrong way. After fighting so long in the desert, the officers were suddenly grappling with a land not dissimilar from the European Alps (...). Menton unfortunately had limited his attack to the valley, probably having underestimated the Americans. He would have to combine the tactics of mountain and plain to eliminate the artillery observers and get behind the enemy"⁽³⁷⁾.

A dissatisfied, Rommel said to Bülowius in that down deep

he was content to conquer the pass to prevent a possible raid enemy behind him, during the course of the main effort on the direction of Sbiba. Bülowius wanted to renew the attack in the early afternoon summoning to the fire the I/8th *Panzerregiment*, waiting at Thelepte. He believed he could do it before dark, but went to meet another disappointment, because the American III/39th Inf. was coming to the aid of the *Task Force* of Stark. The action resumed around 15:30. On the right the II/288th *Grenadiers of Africa* managed to establish itself on the southern foothills of Djebel Semmama, though it remained pinned by a massive American artillery intervention. On the left the I/288th was arrested on north-eastern slopes of the *Jebel ech Chambi*. In the middle, finally, the impact of I/8th *Panzer* ran aground against a intensely wrought minefield.

At nightfall the local situation appeared indecisive. The Germans were aware be a commitment of some significance and the hundreds of prisoners captured certainly did not compensate the setback. The Americans had held, but did not feel at all assured some units had fell back in disorder, others resisted and did not understand what was happening.

Meanwhile Rommel, still uncertain about where and how to use the 10th *Panzer*, had gone to visit the 21st. Even here things went wrong. The march of the division along a bad muddy road made by hours of rain had been very slow and the meeting of minefields in less than eight kilometers from Sbiba did the rest: the units stopped. It was just past noon, and the opening of the gates, although helped by signs of local elements, took time. At 16:00 was it only possible at Col. Hildebrandt move on, but to be almost immediately behind another wing defense undermined by a score of tanks and a couple of groups of artillery. Beyond this obstacle were visible positions held by the Guards Brigade and the American 18th Inf..

Arrested, therefore, the bulk of the division, Hildebrandt tried a move outflanking the right with the I/5th *Panzerregiment* and a part of the mechanized infantry. The aim was to overcome a wing of the minefield, fall on the deployment of the batteries and then go against enemy infantry identified on both sides of the road, a few kilometers further north. The movement of the I/50th *Panzerregiment* pronounced with a certain favor, while the poor German artillery started the fire preparation and two battalions of 104th *Panzergrenadiere* stood in line for the attack at the turn of the roadway. It was at this moment that came Rommel. Despite its admonitions to break the Allied lines with a violent and decisive shock, the action failed with the loss of a dozen tanks and without the armored infantry even able to engage. After that, Hildebrandt resigned himself to retreat the division somewhat and assume an attitude of waiting. He also, according to Rommel, had committed "*the same mistake of a frontal attack in the valley*"

instead of penetrating through the mountains." However, this time the emphasis seems less appropriate than in the case of Kasserine. Surely more conclusive the consideration that unfortunately the enemy had found time and opportunity to gather troops to positions naturally strong.

We see now the appraisal of events accomplished by the two sides. In the afternoon, the noise of the battle of Kasserine had led Gen. Dunphie, commander of the English 26th Arm., to pay a visit to Col. Stark. As found him quite confident, he did not share at all the optimism, in fact it seemed to be unable to control the situation. So, back to Thala, he proposed to the Commander of the 1st Army to bring his brigade to the battlefield to be in a position to act quickly and allow the defense to hold adequate opportunity for dynamic reaction. The head of the G.S. of the army, Gen. McNabb, he wanted to make sure personally about the state of affairs. In the morning he went to the Command of the French 19th Corp to demand the transfer of an part of the American 1st Inf. Div. to 2nd Corp, complained that a serious shortage of infantry, and Koeltz was willing to cede the entire division least temporarily, an artillery battalion and a group destined to await the arrival of the French units of the Division of Algiers. With this in mind, then, in the afternoon when he went to the pass of Kasserine, McNabb deemed preferable to leave the 26th Arm. Bd. at Thala in reserve, at least until he had clarified the situation in Sbiba. However, he authorized the sending of a small mechanized battle group, the *Gore Force*.

Meanwhile Stark, to avoid surprises, phoned in the evening to Tebessa asking reinforcements of all kinds, as well as an intervention by aircraft the next morning. Fredendall met him sending to the match the III/6th Arm. Inf. and orienting Gen. Robinett to move on order, with his *Combat Command B*, both to Thala and to Bahiret Foussana⁽³⁸⁾.

Rommel reflected at length on the dual failure of the day. He was especially annoyed by the apparent consistency of the defense of Sbiba. He judged the US forces weaker abreast of Kasserine and modified the original plan, ordering Gen. von Broich, that from the area of Pinchon was returning to Sbeitla with his 10th Panzer, to continue to the village of Kasserine. He had to get there at dawn, bypass the *Kampfgruppe* of DAK after winning a narrow part of this and continue in the direction of Thala. Bülowius, instead, had to overcome the Foussana basin and block the pass on Djebel Hamra against forces coming from Tebessa and Haïdra.

Not that the forces of the planned merger in Kasserine were then very consistent. Bülowius had called in the mechanized detachment of the *Centauro*, hitherto left at Thelepte where he had been replaced by the 7th Bersaglieri. At the same time in Gen. Calvi received orders to slide forward with the bulk of the division: the motorized detachment

moved to Feriana and left the defense of Gafsa to the detachment on foot of Gen. Costa. All in all, it was not about measures that could weigh so substantial balance. But the worst was that the 10th *Panzer* was present just half because von Arnim had held an important share, including the 501st heavy tank battalion, which included the *Tiger*. Von Broich therefore only had the II/69th and II/86th *Panzergranadiere*, the 10th motorcyclists battalion, the I/7th *Panzer*, a dozen self-propelled pieces and smaller units.

The dawn of January 20, did not bring the sun. A thick blanket of fog covered the valley floor and the basin of Foussana, the mud made movement difficult for wheeled vehicles. According to Rommel all the evil did not come to harm because, at least, the Allied air force had no opportunity to express all his superiority. At 07:00 he was in Kasserine. Von Broich saw and spoke to him about the shooting attack. Although the battalion *Grenadiers* had left block by enemy fire during the night big German patrols had infiltrated the northern slope of Djebel Semmama creating havoc in the American ranks, still unaccustomed to night fighting.

Whatever considerations and intent, the attack in question took place so slowly as to cause harsh rebukes from Rommel, especially as the first to make contact with the enemy, at 10:00, was a *Panzergranadiere* battalion instead 10th motorcyclists Battalion, a experienced unit that would be suited to bypass the Djebel Semmama, just where in the course of the night patrols were able to penetrate, and seize from rear the defenders of the pass.

The western shoulder of the narrow Bonfatti was entrusted to the group, consisting of XIV/5th Bersaglieri, CCIV group 65/17 and smaller units, and supported by a battery of Nebelwerfer, six-barreled rocket launchers to 150 mm of considerable psychological effect also for piercing whistle of the rockets. At 10:30 the Col. Bonfatti attacked Bordj Chambi. In the early afternoon he won the passage of Djebel Zebbeus and a couple of hours after he reached the edge of the Bahiret Foussana basin. The brilliant behavior of Bersaglieri, reported by Bülowius to Rommel, however, had as a negative aspect of death with. Bonfatti.

At the center, astride the track for Thala, were ready to act the I/8th *Panzerregiment* and XVI/31st Tank. On the right, the fight took place with difficulty, tending to break up into episodes. The regiment *Panzergranadiere Afrika* could not breakthrough even at the cost of high losses.

Rommel wanted to accelerate the tempo. He knew, as he knew Bülowius, that it was necessary to break the defense by evening if you wanted to go on the offensive. He harbored absolute confidence. Therefore he ordered Gen. Calvi to aim to Thelepte against the pass of Dernaja and head for Bou Chebka, promising to reinforce the *Centauro* motorized detachment with two German companies: a paratrooper

of the *Luftwaffe* and a anti-tank. He clarified his thinking: the action of the *Centauro* would give aid a column of the *Kampfgruppe* of DAK from the pass of Bou Chebka (and thus a break-out occurred).

In the enemy camp, the arrival of Gen. Allen with the Command of his Inf. Div. and the 16th *Combat Team* on the plateau of Bou Chebka had naturally given more vigor to the defense, although the atmosphere at the command of the 2nd Corp was not the best. It is clear that the move of the detachment of *Centauro*, supported by just five pieces of artillery, was to remain unrealistic. It was postponed until the next day, waiting for a higher contribution of fire.

However, at 17:00 the situation is unfroze with the arrival of the first battalions of the 10th *Panzer* and shortly after the pass of Kasserine could be considered firmly in Italian-German hands. Much of the defenders moved back more or less quickly, the infantry of III/6th Arm. Inf. climbing on the Djebel Semmama in reinforcing elements of the I/26th Inf. and III/39th Inf. They found themselves isolated and only with the cover of night many managed to escape. The thirty *half-tracks* left on the slopes of Djebel remained booty to the winner.

He remained to Col. Stark one card: a company of the II/13th Tank, the 894th *Tank Destroyer Battalion* and *Gore Force*, all arrived in the morning. The counterattack had no tale and is the English means (eleven *Valentine* and *Crusader*) and American ones (eight *Grant*) were repulsed with severe losses by I/8th *Panzerregiment*. Also concluded this episode, Rommel ordered Biilowius to push reconnaissance on Djebel Hamra at first light the next day and von Broich of doing likewise to Thala, keeping both ready to continue the offensive on two lines.

Now the streets to Thala and Tebessa seemed open. Rommel, admired for the arming of the American divisions and satisfied for the spoils of war, took advantage of the brief visit made by Kesselring asking him to impose on von Arnim the ceding of the rest of the 10th *Panzer*, which Kesselring did during the stop at the Tunis airport, before returning to Frascati. Moreover von Arnim replied that he could not grant the request because the units of the 10th *Panzer* were held in reserve, but already in contact with the enemy in the valley of Medjerda. Indeed to support the need to ... get back the entire 10th *Panzer*. All that Kesselring could prescribe was maneuvering the diversion on Maktar.

By mid-morning, informed of the growing difficulties at the pass of Kasserine, Fredendall had ordered *Combat Command B* to go to Thala to descend from north to give a hand to *Stark Force*. Then he went there personally and, after a quick interview with Gen. Dunphie, he had continued to hold. Halfway he learned of the breakthrough by the Axis. Immediately changed deployment: Dunphie had to stop with his 26th Brigade and block the path of Thala, recovering as much as possible of the troops of Stark; Gen.

Robinett had to turn towards the valley of Bahiret Foussana and block the passages of Djebel Hamra with *Combat Command B*. The next day, the two teams would be launched at the counter attack under the coordination of Dunphie.

If, after all, on the front of Kasserine events were put to good to the Axis, not just as it happened at Sbiba. Col. Hildebrandt tried a maneuver that, in essence, repeated the previous but with greater scope, but the numerical superiority of allied artillery was able to stop the painful search in the mud the 5th *Panzerregiment*. In the afternoon the German action came to a standstill and a further effort, although it managed to penetrate the lines of the American 34th Inf. Div., could not change the overall situation. The stunted unit of Hildebrandt - two battalions of armored grenadiers, thirty tanks and six field batteries -not have the physical conditions to obtain a statement against a barrier consisting of eight Americans battalions, three Britons and a French with a squadron of 25 *Churchill* 38 tons. and three groups of 105.

THE ITALIAN-GERMAN PUSH ON THALA AND TEBESSA (February 21 to 22).

Rommel had not quite realized the havoc caused by the clashes of the previous days, much less could imagine the confusion in the enemy Commands. He thought an immediate counterattack and almost inevitable, although already in the night of the 21st pushed recon elements toward Thala Haïdra and referred it to a determined enemy retreat, continued for several hours to believe ordered the American retrograde movement from the Kasserine pass and to recommend to Bülowius "*defend the passes to the west of the Kasserine- Thala road* " and von Broich to take defensive precautions. During the morning of the 21st he began to change his mind and to perceive the possibility of a success beyond expectations. "*Master [= Rommel] is completely remounted and euphoric*" telegraphed to command of the 1st Army Lt.Col. Di Carlo, Italian liaison officer, shortly after noon. As a result, the offensive resumed slowly, while the motorized detachment of the *Centauro*, reinforced by some units from Gafsa, took possession of the lower passes access from the southeast to the plateau of Bou Chebka.

But in the Allied camp he had changed hands. On the evening of the 15 January Alexander had reached Laverdure with the intention to make a preliminary inspection tour of the entire front before taking up his new post. The 16th visited the British 5th Corp, the 17th the French 19th Corp, the 18-19th the American 2nd Corp. The most time devoted to this weigh essentially on the circumstances:

"I realized that the situation was even more critical than I had imagined and inspection in the sector of Kasserine showed me clearly that, in the inevitable confusion of the retreat, the American, British and French troops were

were mixed inextricably, that there was no organic defensive plan and the most complete uncertainty reigned in the commands of the big unit" ⁽³⁹⁾.

He went back to Constantine, chosen as the location for the headquarters of the 18th Army Group, and determined to take office immediately, one day in advance. Seemed clear that if at first Rommel had simply had the intention of throwing the Corp of Fredendall in shambles, so as to feel comfortable while facing the 8th Army, now - knowing - had stand stroking an idea far more ambitious. If he had broken through to the north would have fallen on the rear of the 19th Corp, already rather poorly developed; and if he had arrived in Le Kef she would have found the rear of the 5th Corp. It does not appear that Alexander will be asked if Rommel had forces really sufficient to the task. Evidently it was enough to see what state a few days of fighting had reduced a large part of the Allied army. Immediately he ordered him to stiffen the resistance everywhere.

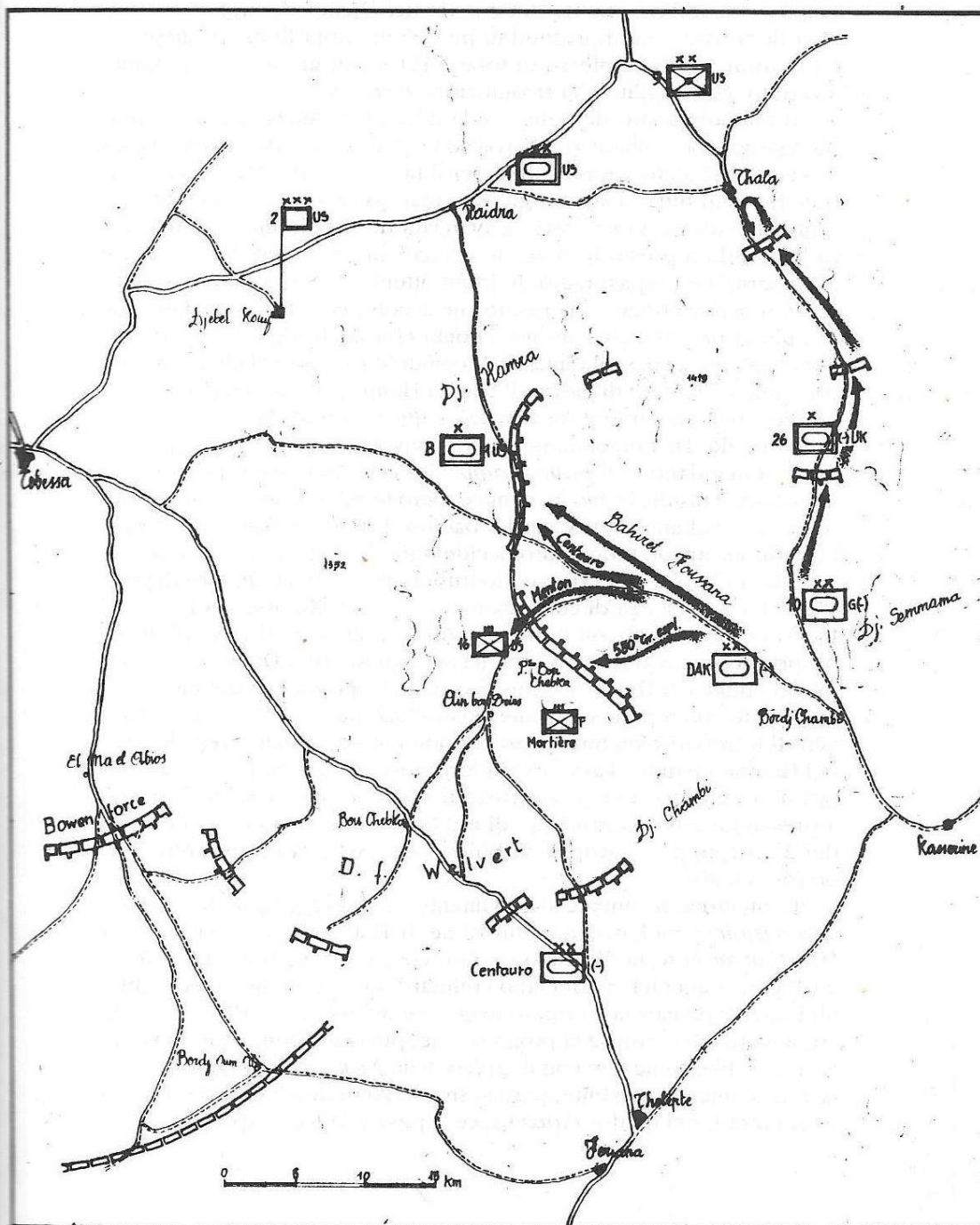
Anderson, caught off guard by the fall of Kasserine, decided to intervene personally: sent in Gen. McNabb to Thala for an examination of the events and commissioned Gen. Nicholson, deputy commander of the 6th Arm. Div., to bar the director. Arriving in Thala, McNabb chaired a meeting which was attended by Generals Dunphie and Robinett and Col. Stark. He opened the conference at 01:00 of the 21st declaring that the situation in Tunisia was "*desperately critical*", that all Allied tanks were available in practice concentrated in that sector and that therefore it was necessary to avoid losing them with reckless actions. Was unanimous recognition that the *status quo* was "*deteriorated*" to the point of giving up *a priori* an early resumption of the initiative. And, also, there was the unanimous agreement on the proposed of Robinett to stay on the defensive, let the enemy ran out and then, with the support of a strong mass of artillery, counter-attack concentrically. Therefore, *Combat Command B* was stiffen on the edges of the Djebel Hamra and the 26th Arm. Bd. led a retarding action from twenty kilometers south of Thala. All pending artillery of the American 9th Inf. Div., already started from Grano. The meeting had just ended when came in Gen. Nicholson - delayed by the deplorable conditions of the slopes - which, made aware of the discussion, approved the plan and established headquarters of *Nickforce* (as it was called by the group under his command) next to that of the 6th Arm. Div.. The official British report lists commanders who, under the distant supervision of Fredendall, in one way or another became interested in the sector of Kasserine: Gen. Ward, Col. Moore, Col. Stark, Gen. Dunphie, Gen. Robinett, Gen. Nicholson and - we add US - Gen. McNabb, "*all had fingers in the pie*"⁽⁴⁰⁾.

However, when the units of Rommel resumed the advance of the Anglo-American defenses were ready to receive them (sketch n. 48). The

The attack on Thala and Tebessa (21-22 February)

Schizzo n. 48

L'ATTACCO VERSO THALA E TEBESSA
(21-22 febbraio)



the Tactical Grouping of the *Centauro* commissioned by Bülowius to attack the pass of Djebel Hamra moved after noon. It was composed by the XIV/5th Bersaglieri, XVII/132nd Tank, CCIV group 65/17 not that of the 33rd Recon Bn. and three German batteries. The information provided by the 33rd Recon Bn. gave opponents a few elements present in the east of the crest of the Djebel Hamra, but it was not news in depth because it really Robinett disposal of a large grouping of forces ⁽⁴¹⁾, whose big, slightly back, was escaped terrestrial reconnaissance.

The improvement in the weather and the reduced force of the wind made possible the use of aviation, but the Bahiret Foussana basin had become impassable mud and *wadis* Hatab, who crossed it in all its length, impassable due the river that now flowed. The advancing Italian-German column was slow and soon seriously hampered by fire from enemy batteries, or a passage of *Stuka* got much effect given the intense anti-aircraft fire American who received the formation. A few hours later the attack ran aground not far from the target. Bülowius then suspended the attempt, and he informed Rommel, as impossible to deal with the day of Djebel Hamra and arduous do it in the dark, the tendency was to make a night turning of the southern slope of Djebel, on the side of Tebessa.

The commander of the *Kampfgruppe* of DAK could not know the intentions and location of the enemy, but his feelings were centered. Not only the head of the Bahiret Foussana basin became strong, but also around the western side of the basin, around the pass of Bou Chebka was receiving troops, although in a context of almost total absence of coordination. Gen. Robinett sent the II/6th Arm. Inf. to act with II/13th in a counterattack. Gen. Allen on their own sent the III/16th Inf. in the area of Ain Bou Dries with the task of helping the II/16th Inf., deployed at the pass but mixed with Senegalese units already in place by order of Gen. Welvert. The I/16th Inf. He made a long detour to take the extreme west of Djebel Hamra; when approached in attack formation he discovered that for more than a day had been placed *Combat Command B*. However, apart from these mistakes and lacking control action of the 2nd Corp, for the troops of Bülowius the bone was always harder to chew.

Simultaneously with the movement of the *Kampfgruppe*, the 10th *Panzerdivision* was launched in the direction of Thala, with thirty tanks of the I/7th *Panzer* in the led. The first clash of the with a advanced part of the 26th Arm. Bd., Deployed on a hill crest, was favorable to the Germans and the British retreated to the safety of a smoke screen. At about 15:00 the German column progressed, more cautiously this time. And soon he had to deal with the bulk of *Nickforce*. The fighting came on immediately, however breaking into groups of small armored duels, in which the *Panzer* did weigh their superiority.

At about 16:00 showed up Rommel naturally urged von Broich for an early conclusion: "*He did not understand - he said - we were engaged in a desperate race with the allied reserves*"⁽⁴²⁾. The use of armored infantry to try to infiltrate to some extent the British defense did not solve much; in return he constituted a threat so obvious that after an hour, seeing the worsening situation, Dunphie ordered a retreat on the final ridge south of Thala. Under the incitement of von Broich the German tanks continued and finally managed to penetrate between the lines of a stiffened defense aimed to play for broke, kicking off a furious battle in the shadows of the night and the light of the vehicles in flames. It lasted a couple of hours, and if the 10th Panzer had broken through developments likely would have taken a different color: behind Thala there was more than a battalion of Algerian *Tirailleurs*. But von Broich did not know and his men were exhausted. Then broke contact at about 22:00 and moved back with a haul of 38 tanks, 12 anti-tank guns, 16 heavy mortars destroyed or captured and 571 prisoners. The real winner was Nicholson.

In the eyes of the Allies the resumption of the offensive of Rommel appeared fraught with extremely serious consequences. In the early hours of the 21st, an intercept radio reported that the 10th and 21st Panzer were directed to Le Kef " *in the first place* ", that the Axis deemed to have at hand a unique opportunity to cut off the English 5th Corp or to force the Allied forces of the south to retire, and the 5th Armored Army was preparing an offensive on the northern front. According to the information service of the army, in the triangle Foussana -Thala -Kasserine there were two groups of fifty tanks each; They were already engaged in combat elements of the 10th and 21st *Panzer*, the 501st *Tiger* tank battalion and the *Centauro*; but it was not where they were ... the bulk. Ultimately, there is not much wonder at mid-morning of the 21st Anderson, who had placed their Tactical Command at the Command of the 19th Corp, he hinted at the possibility of abandoning Koeltz Sbiba and look for a cheaper set back, at advantage of the establishment of a reserve at the time non-existent. The idea fell by itself when, in the afternoon, an envoy of Koeltz phoned from Sbiba: "*Withdraw impossible tonight, Ryder attacked again ... fight in progress*"⁽⁴³⁾.

At 18:00, Anderson, impressed by the difficulties in which the struggling *Nickforce*, returned to bomb: considering the real possibility that Rommel break through Thala, it was better to adopt appropriate measures as long as it was on time, that is, withdraw the right side of the 19th Corp to the heights of Le Kef? Koeltz replied briskly that a retreat of fifty kilometers of suitable terrain for armored maneuver would lead to the sure dissolution of the French troops. If anything, it was preferable that they would hold up in the mountains of Maktar! However, he expressed optimism: if Rommel had continued north, his supply line would have been cut

to the pass of Kasserine, in other words in a gut easily interrupted by Allied. Anderson went not very persuaded by announcing that he hoped their prompt arrival in the American artillery at Thala.

The state of mind of Rommel began to deteriorate, not because of the awareness of play now the last card to get to Le Kef, as to the conscience of ambiguity fearful of its forces. It maintained the provisions to continue to fight the next day, but with a healthy dose of skepticism.

On the night of the 22nd new weight was thrown on the scales. After a long journey from Grano, arrived on the battlefield the artillery of the American 9th Inf. Div. twelve howitzers of 155, twenty-four of 105 and twelve of 75/16. Just after sunrise these thirty-six pieces, added to the forty-eight of *Nickforce*, opened fire. Rommel and von Broich was the signal for an imminent counterattack. All that remained was waiting at the firm foot and then react. Indeed, a dozen tanks - the last of the 26th Arm. Bd. - came from the British positions. It was a bluff. He was paid a high price, with the destruction of seven armored vehicles, but reached the goal of leaving the Germans for several hours in uncertainty.

Bülowius, However, was still directed against the Djebel Hamra. The grouping of the *Centauro* proceeded to engage the front of *Combat Command B* to give way to the Menton group to circumvent the Djebel and reappear from the south to the north, behind the defense. Unfortunately during the night march to reach the starting point, in a violent storm, the two battalions of *Panzergranadiere* lost their way and bent to the south, along the track alleging Ain Bou Dries, in other words, taking the north of intermingled French and American units. Nevertheless, Menton at 07:30 and immediately attacked overthrew II/16th Inf. and 33rd artillery group, ambushed by an enemy expected to come from the southeast and northeast. The time of crisis does not last long, but it took all day to restore order in heterogeneous troops defense. Past the effect of impact sudden, the battalions of Menton they were quickly be under a concentrated fire that nullified any ambitions and repulsed them back.

As a result of the direction error the column of Menton, the grouping of the *Centauro* soon found himself in dire straits. The XIV/5th Bersaglieri had to deal with the American II/16th Tank reinforced: repelled the first attack at 08:00, but could not support the second, made a couple of hours later, and that barely with losses. At that moment, XVII/132nd Tank with a self-propelled battery and the I/8th *Panzer* tried to ease the pressure on the Bersaglieri and reject the Djebel Hamra units of Robinett. At first this intervention seemed to find some lucky inspiration, but the artillery fire was not overcome the enemy. Before long the Italian armored units were four tanks and two self-propelled and

German battalion was reduced to a minimum. Under the circumstances, at 13:00 Bülowius ordered the retreat towards the Kasserine Pass, to be implemented at dusk.

Rommel chewed bitterly. Proved too obvious the gap between the enemy availability. Of course the Americans were inexperienced and unprepared, but "*their wealth of weapons and anti-tank armor was so huge - we could look with little hope of success to a future battle maneuver*" ⁽⁴⁴⁾. At 14:00 he received another visit from Kesselring, accompanied by *Fliegerführer* Seidemann, from Col. Westphal, and from Col. Montezemolo of the Comando Supremo. Leut. Col. De Carlo told the 1st Army Command: "*The meeting between two marshals, held in the presence of Montezemolo without points, had shown uncertainty of the two parties about opportunities to continue action. Rommel, as new black, in his heart would not want to give it up, but action at Thala about to start will be crucial*" ⁽⁴⁵⁾.

In fact, Rommel fed very little confidence that the attempt on Thala finally offered favorable prospects. He accused of failure a bit to all: the Comando Supremo that it had given Tebessa as a objective; von Arnim who had not sent the entire 10th Panzer and, especially, the battalion of *Tigers*, Col. Hildebrandt who had led the 21st Panzer with the momentum needed; the same Bülowius who was not satisfied; the weather, the mud and the rain that had not enabled his *Panzer* handling in tactical field.

Kesselring, who already saw Rommel turning against the 8th Army and launch against it "*the last decisive attack and overwhelming*", was disoriented. In particular, it was adversely affected by overt attention from the 8th Army and Rommel not, of course, with the aforementioned aggressive intentions. Rommel wanted to return as soon as possible because he feared offensive of Montgomery on Mareth. Kesselring tried to challenge that concern: "*But he now has the lead! - He said - And I do not share his opinion that the line of Mareth is in danger. This is a defensive system that constitutes a formidable obstacle to any aggressor, and no Commander would like to address it without careful preparation*" ⁽⁴⁶⁾. It was not convincing and, ultimately, is adapted to accept the conclusion that the unreliability of a continuation of Le Kef made it inevitable liquidation of the "little by little".

The discontent and despair of Rommel were so obvious and ingrained that he replied in the negative to the probing of Kesselring on the assumption of command of the Army Group. He thought that only now, after the offensive, he was no longer "*persona non grata*" and that in high places now could tolerate his "*defeatism*". He rejected the proposal, or rather the idea, pointing to the fact of knowing that Hitler had already appointed von Arnim. He paused a second reason for refusal: he did not want to endure more irritation of the Comando Supremo

and the OBS. Kesselring took note of it and took his leave. He wanted to talk with von Arnim⁽⁴⁷⁾.

The afternoon events confirmed, if you can use that expression, the worst fears of Rommel. He had just sent the order to of cancellation to the continuation of the operation that, at 17:00, a coordinated response between Allen and Robinett swept any remaining illusion of the *Kampfgruppe* of DAK. In particular, the XIV/5th Bersaglieri suffered greatly of the ruinous effects of counter blows.

On the night Rommel sent to the Comando Supremo the evening bulletin:

"The continuous reinforcements are flowing to the enemy forces during the day of 02/22, the unfavorable weather conditions that prevent to maneuver off of roads and the increasing difficulty of the mountainous terrain for the rapid use of troops, to the likelihood that the continuation of the attack with the limited forces available has no chance of success. The army ordered therefore, in agreement with the OBS, the cessation of the attack and the withdrawal of troops attacking in the afternoon, however, after inflicting heavy losses on the enemy and having broken the deployment.

This decision was caused by the fact that the situation on the front of Mareth requires a fast move, into that area, the mobile troops of the two armies, in order to strike the enemy like lightning not yet ready for the attack on his positions for collection thus obtain a deferral of the attack."

Losses Axis February 19 to 22 amounted to a thousand Germans killed, wounded or missing, a total of 400 Italians, 5 anti-tank guns, 4 rocket launchers from 150, 20 tanks, 60 vehicles and 6 armored cars. Those reported by the Allies was higher than considered by Rommel: 300 dead, 3,000 injured and 3,000 missing (but the Germans signaled 3,700 prisoners), 183 tanks, 194 half-tracks, 208 artillery pieces, 512 vehicles and large quantities of supplies of every type. However, the American logistics will succeed in bringing from the US 4,500 vehicles and 10,000 tons of materials by early March.

Meanwhile, the meeting had taken place between Kesselring and von Arnim in Bizerte. An exchange of views that left the first even more dissatisfied than he was. In front of the insistence of the commander of the 5th Army about the inability to assign troops to Rommel, he ended up surrendering. In fact, von Arnim was not left entirely with our arms folded. On February 20, he summoned his main subordinates to concretize the contribution by providing the offensive of Le Kef with diversions or local actions and, at the same time, first exploitation of any weakening of the front sections of the Allied 5th and 19th Corps. At that meeting he had, in short, ordered to keep close contact with the enemy across the board through intensive reconnaissance, so as to have immediate perception of possible withdraws; to prepare motorized battlegroups for maneuver actions, just allowed by the circumstances; to orient to achieve the narrows and the passes

Djebel Bargou and Djebel Sergj (*Superga* Inf. Div.), Siliana (sector Benigni) and Maktar (sector Lang). Start of operation: 22 February.

In essence, while the German sectors of Bizerte and Tunis and the north of the *Superga*⁽⁴⁸⁾ were limited, at least initially, to the improvement of positions within a dozen kilometers or so, the Italian XXX Corps had something more to accomplish: not only link its left to the 21st *Panzer*, acting on the Sbiba-Ksour direction, but especially threaten the other side of the French line, pressed from the east by the *Superga*. Depending, of course, the need for deep penetration, Gen. Sogno did prepare three motorized sets. That of Leut. Col. Reisoli with the I/91st Inf. reinforced, the German A-28 battalion and minor units (sector Benigni); that of Leut. Col. Buhse with the bulk of the 47th *Grenadiere*, the I/86th Rifles, 190th Tank battalion, the 334th Celere group and smaller units (sector Lang); that of col. Lequio with all the units of the 50th mechanized special brigade (sector Imperiali). The first two groups were employed by the respective commanders of the sector, the third came under the disposal of the army corps.

The recon elements had already moved in the day of the 21st occupying Ousseltia and El Ala, but the real advance was to begin the next day, the 23rd. So von Arnim was useless as well as impossible, change the game, especially if you did not think of Rommel having success or if, however, the fate of Thala was still uncertain.

Kesselring - returned to Frascati irritated "*stubbornness*" of Rommel and von Arnim, however, at a table reviewing the situation in Tunisia, he had to admit that the continuation of the offensive in the direction of Le Kef or Tebessa had become impossible. The Supreme commander agreed and in the evening Ambrosio issued the order:

"Attack in central Tunisia should be suspended. Mobile troops fall back fighting on the starting positions. Exploiting every opportunity to inflict blows to the enemy who followed our movements (...) Tomorrow 23 will be enacted provisions for the further conduct of the operations"⁽⁴⁹⁾.

It must be said that as part of the 5th Armored Army not everything worked as intended. The 23rd, before dawn, began ... the advance of XXX Corps. It lasted, indeed, because a few hours after noon came the communication of von Arnim blocking everything and recalled the troops to the bases of departure. This for groups of Reisoli and Lequio. When, in fact, Sogno returned to their command, in Kairouan, after following the movements of Ousseltia, he learned with astonishment and indignation that Colonel. Lang - that on the 22nd had gone about twenty kilometers northwest of Pichon -He had already given during the retreat the orders received directly from the commander of the army in the early hours of the 23rd⁽⁵⁰⁾.

3. Epilogue.

Also on February 22 he had caused excitement to the Allies. From the first morning, after the end of the last tank of the 26th Arm. Bd., Gen. Nicholson had turned to the 2nd Corps Command reporting that seventy *Panzer* were preparing to break through to Thala and therefore demanded maximum aid by *Combat Command B*. Fredendall found no better pass the news to Robinett and appoint Gen. Ward to coordinate the actions of *Combat Command B* and *Nickforce*.

Shortly after there came another stormy news: apparently a German episode had sown panic among the American units located in the area of the pass Bou Chebka. The result was the same rumor that the command of the corps was threatened and someone, nobody knew who, gave the order to transfer it to the north.

Alarmed, in the afternoon Gen. Juin went to visit Gen. Welvert to hear exactly the pulse of the French. He found it envenomed. He had struggled for hours to restore order on the plateau of Bou Chebka and Fredendall, that in his eyes "*did not possess more knowledge of military art of a simple corporal*" ⁽⁵¹⁾, he had been in touch to tell him to study a retreat of the division of Algiers to the mountains of Tebessa, fearing that the Allied defenses were yielding everywhere. Juin resolved to go straight to the Command of 2nd Corp. When we showed up he was astonished to see it in the middle of moving house. Fredendall was sitting on a box in his office already dismantled, very down to spirit. The questions of the French, said that the idea of withdraw was at an order of the command of the army, however had no reserves and most likely would have been forced to leave quickly (note that this happened on the afternoon of the 22nd, when Rommel had thrown in the towel).

Juin asked then which way he meant to fall back and Fredendall pointed northward, because he could not abandon the British 5th Corp. Juin tried to reason with him: abandon Tebessa, that is, his base and his axis of supplies and evictions, meant not only a logistical collapse but the convenient access to the region of Constantine on the German side, in addition of course to not prevent the fall of Thala and Le Kef. Fredendall not listen to reason: it was an order, and all the consequences that would ensue were to provide the superior commands.

Now Juin exploded. He showed on a tank-in the ground between Tebessa and Constantine; pointed out that, reached Tebessa, the *Panzer* would come to Constantine in a few hours, and concluded: "*My wife and my children are in Costantina, I warn you that if you refuse to want to process the order of Anderson, there I will take, my personal authority, the division of Costantina to defend Tebessa and get us all killed.*" Where reasoning had failed, emotion succeeded. Fredendall attitude changed immediately, and swore that he would not

abandoned Tebessa, rather it would have killed him with the French ⁽⁵²⁾.

The scaremongering had caused some backlash anywhere. Also to the French 19th Corp. Anderson said the morning had to Thala Koeltz send the two battalions of the Guards still in line at Sbiba. After some discussion resulting from the fact that the implementation of this measure would entail a withdrawal of the defense of about twelve kilometers, Koeltz was forced to obey. Moreover, as he found it, the situation was becoming more critical: the Tactical Command of the army was moving to Le Kef in the night and advised the French to do the same!

In short, for the whole day a pessimistic view about the course of the battle in different sectors dominated among the Allies. It is true that at 22:00 Anderson attended Koeltz some news more reassuring: in the east of Djebel Hamra the enemy had been repulsed, Thala is hoped to hold up, hold Kasserine had been hit by 26 bombers. It seemed that even Rommel had taken a step back, but maybe he was tidying the forces for a renewal of the operation.

“For Short - worte Gen. Koeltz -the evening of February 22, the tension was still great in all the interested Allied Headquarters. Everyone expected a continuation of the enemy offensive and the possibility of a retreat had been seriously taken in consideration”⁽⁵³⁾.

In the night came Gen. Harmon. In relation to the bad outcome of the fighting of Sidi Bou Zid and Sbeitla, Fredendall had requested the replacement of Gen. Ward. Eisenhower summoned immediately from Morocco Gen. Harmon, commander of the American 2nd Arm. Div.; but then, reflecting that Ward could not be solely responsible for what had occurred, he preferred - at least at first to assign to the office of "right hand man" of Fredendall for the coordination of allied actions in the area of Thala .

Harmon showed up at Kouif headquarters of the 2nd Corp, at about 03:00 hours of 23 February. Made aware of the events going on, he went to find Ward at Haïdra and Nicholson at Thala and took the situation in hand. He told the first to take all its units are ready to move in any direction except back; the second, to stand all day and not to move until nightfall. Moreover, just an hour later, the Commander of the army took away their sector of Thala passing it to Gen. Keightley, commander of the English 6th Arm. Div..

Gen. Koeltz observed: *"It was no confidence in the American commander? It was to collect the 6th Arm. Div. In the event of a northern retreat? In all cases, it was the fifth time in four days that the direction of the defense of Thala changed hands"* ⁽⁵⁴⁾.

In compensation, Harmon became an asset when Nicholson warned that a higher order would move to Le Kef the artillery of

the American 9th Inf. Div.. The absurdity of such a measure Harmon dug in his heels curtly and carried the day.

Knowing that in the evening of 22nd the information service managed to intercept the order to retreat directed by Rommel to a German units and that at 01:45 of the 23rd was deciphered the directive of the Comando Supremo of the suspension of the operation and the return on starting positions ⁽⁵⁵⁾, it is hard to believe that only in the late morning of the 23rd the Allies seemed to be convinced that the dreaded enemy was gone. They seemed inconceivable that the Germans and Italians leave without resistance positions they had conquered a high price. Where was Rommel? What he had in mind?

At 11:00 of the 23rd the Gen. Welvert summarized his knowledge to Koeltz:

"Contrary to all expectations, the night of the 23rd was calm in front of Ain el Amar and at sunrise only the battlefield was completely silent and deserted. Not a single tank was visible in Bled Doussana. The patrols have resumed contact. The enemy is gone, but the ground is covered with weapons, ammunition, equipment, documents, enemy corpses abandoned without burial, contrary to the German habits. Everything is going to mean a hasty retreat"⁽⁵⁶⁾.

In the afternoon, the withdrawal of troops of the Axis and was confirmed only in the area of Ousseltia was recorded aggressiveness of Italian columns, however the Allied commands did not seem to care much to pursue. Eisenhower, accompanied by Gen. Truscott, went to Tebessa and spoke to Fredendall and Allen. For the first time, then he remembered Truscott, appeared "*a clear sign of optimism*" ⁽⁵⁷⁾.

As French patrols had reached in the late afternoon on the Jebel ech Chambi, four kilometers from the pass of Kasserine, without meeting a soul, it was generally believed that the German resistance would have stiffened precisely at that location. Yet, notice the shocked Koeltz, just before midnight Gen. Harmon "*orders Gen. Ward organize a full-scale attack on the pass ... for the dawn of the 25th: two days!*"⁽⁵⁸⁾.

When, on the 25th, after long and intense artillery preparation, the 2nd Corp moved towards Kasserine, he met the void. Rommel's troops were already returned to the pass of Faid (10th and 21st *Panzer*), or gone to El Guettar (*Centauro*) or on the back of the line of Mareth (*Kampfgruppe* of DAK). The retreat began with the retreat of Bülowius, protected and then followed by von Broich; therefore Hildebrandt was dropped south to Sbeitla. The pass of Kasserine was occupied by the Allies in the afternoon; at sunset Americans entered the village of Kasserine and the fall of the evening were Feriana. According Eisenhower tracking was greatly delayed by a sea of mines, traps, demolitions and destruction left by Rommel in his wake; according to the Gen. Koeltz unspeakable disorganization of the Allied Command.

Churchill had watched with trepidation and growing discontent the course of the battle. On the 24th wrote to Alexander:

“1. Towards Natale had given up the idea to launch the first armed attack and the last two months had been made every effort to supply the stores and to inject reinforcements. It is true that the withdrawal of French troops from the front is a complication, but in return they got numerous American units. These same troops, however, are passed under the command of Anderson and were by him or by some other scattered in bits and pieces, as you yourself reported on a broad front weakly defended. There was the mood suited them they had no idea about the use of the army; units were in conditions very similar to those of the 8th Army, and when you and Monty will take command. It would be appropriate to back up the south face of the hills; instead it was provided not to the establishment of a solid front of it a prudent retreat. Before the attack began, our intelligence service gave repeated warnings; even then a retreat would have been very reasonable. Nobody cared for these positions, whose names continued to be ignored, until they were lost. Even a diversion could have been very opportune, but it all came to nothing and let the American II Corps was disrupted and suffer heavy losses under the impetus of 150 enemy tanks launched the attack on the stretch in front of it held.

2. The situation has now been restored, but it will have to investigate carefully about what happened. I count on you and your clarity of judgment, it is certain that there pressured to cover men incompetent or incapable.

3. I am also pleased to learn that the *Churchill* tanks much reviled have proved (...)”⁽⁵⁹⁾.

Alexander replied three days later:

“I just returned from a tour of inspection, which lasted three days, the American and French lines advanced. The grouping and the reorganization of the forces are currently in progress, a little late but the enemy action in the north. In general, it can be said that Americans lack the experience and the French arms. As for the Americans I am posting the best officers available to instruct them on combat techniques and to assist in their training. As for the French, I telegraphed to Britain and the Middle East, asking to be sent by air weapons essential and light equipment, and meanwhile do everything we can with the means at my disposal (...).

To put it frankly, I was impressed by the situation that I found. Although it is true that Anderson should have more quickly grasp the real situation and the commencement now to do what I'm doing now, it must be remembered that he assumed command of the entire front only on 24 January. I am organizing the troops into three major groupings: British and French troops under the command of Anderson, all Americans under the command of Fredendall, the 8th Army under the command of Montgomery.

It pains me to give you a regret, but the final victory in North Africa is not imminent (is not just round the corner). There is still much to be done both on the ground and in the air (...)”⁽⁶⁰⁾.

Alexander showed disapproval about the work of Anderson and Fredendall. In fact the commander of the army reacted too slowly to the offensive of Rommel and seemed, on several occasions, to get carried away by the events, but Eisenhower refused

upset the "equilibrium" in the Allied camp and left in place until the end of the campaign. Fredendall for the case was different. Apart from certain originality⁽⁶¹⁾, the impatience with the advice of others, particularly the almost ostentatious antipathy against Anderson, the poor patience and confidence even masked to the French, was the fact that too many shortcomings had emerged in his efforts to command. Gen. Robinett did not hesitate to complain of serious flaws that had suffered damage the unity of the 2nd Corp, such as the lack of any coordination of action, the absence of limits of the field, no information on the same friendly troops, the fragmentation of units, the lack of control over the immediate rear. So when Alexander expressed a negative opinion on the character, Eisenhower did not hesitate to look for a replacement. On March 6 Gen. Patton will take command of the American 2nd Corp.

By the Axis disagreement between Rommel and von Arnim weighed in sensitive measurement on the offensive against the British 1st Army. Rommel, in our opinion, made the mistake of not admitting their uncertainties arising from an apparent state of exhaustion (widely justified) and the consequent need to leave the command, while recognizing human for him to continue to fight in the assumption, that it was wrong or founded, to be the only really able - to ability, knowledge of the operating environment and the enemy, war experience and prestige - to get the little you could earn on the battlefield. Ignorant of the strength of the opponent, but soon came into possession of significant elements deeply about Americans and the doubts came back to shake his mind, he knew that in every way he could count on the equivalent of just three battalions of scarce tanks. If, then, the offensive had not purchased immediately on the appearance of a breakthrough - fast and overwhelming, it soon would have to contend with a formidable Allied reaction, especially the air: and, we might add, perhaps even Rommel imagined how extraordinary timeliness He made the decision to put an end to the offensive of the *Angriffsgruppe Nord*, as had been called the group of forces with whom he had attempted to break through.

If he had disposed of the entire 10th *Panzer* and the famous *Tiger*, it would be successful in? Maybe yes. If he had known the disorientation in the enemies command, he would insist? Maybe yes. But it must also consider the reverse question: if the Allied *Intelligence Service* could compose in a more significant the copious information provided by *Ultra* and from normal sources of information, the commands would have allowed themselves to climax?

The Italian contribution, that says little. Not to keep it in breach, but because objectively less incisive. Without wishing to attribute it to an intentional position taken by the German, in fact that the only major unit of Italian high level, namely the XXX Corps, was such in name only. In fact it was a heterogeneous grouping

of Italian and German units of oscillating force level. This regardless of the ease, to put it mildly, with which von Arnim removed and assigned units, indicated mandatory tasks and determined domestic sectors. As the parts of the *Centauro* engaged in *Kampfgruppe* of DAK, they fought well in the context of the tasks assigned to them, but they could not have decisive weight.

Ultimately, it is likely to think that the first phase of the maneuver internal lines would achieve the desired success only with a greater availability of tanks, infantry, artillery and aviation. With what was there, it was more difficult to get well. Certainly appears the deplorable egocentric attitude of von Arnim. Whatever his beliefs, he could well understand the need to promote in every way the only shot that could result in a more or less significant jolt in enemy lines. But the negative judgment on the behavior of the commander of the 5th Army, calls into question Kesselring. He hath laid blame and guilt on the Comando Supremo and on the OKW. True, the delay the definition of control of the theater, that is, the group of Army, damaged crucially. But he himself, who as OBS and for specific assignment from Hitler in person exercised a sort of superintendence over Tunisia, forgot to admit their responsibility in the lack of coordination of efforts in such an important moment. I scolded, and even harshly, von Arnim, but with what result?

Immediately after the conclusion of the battle, two measures were taken that if put in place before they would likely yielded the best results: the establishment of the army group and the offensive of the 5th Armored Army.

Let's see it. The morning of the 23rd, when it was returned to the *status qua ante*, von Arnim went in flight to Frascati (without the knowledge of Rommel, his superior) to submit for approval his plan to the OBS impending operation that intended to implement in Northern Tunisia. In truth, it was not an initiative extemporaneous. On the 22nd Kesselring had authorized a pressure of the 5th Army to facilitate the disengagement of Rommel and also to give more leeway to the bridgehead at the ports of Bizerte and Tunis. Von Arnim had been discussing the matter with Gen.. von Manteuffel, the new commander of the division already entrusted to von Broich, and the newly-promoted in Gen. Weber, and eventually conclude by focusing on action against Medjez el Bab to be made on the 26th was the easiest and the safest, both from an organizational and on that executive.

Kesselring received up to a certain point the design of von Arnim and decided that the attack was extended to the entire front of the army, with the main effort in the direction of Beja just aiming for the desired magnification of the bridgehead. But there was a problem to solve:

the directives of the Comando Supremo never envisaged that such an operation. So Kesselring went to convince Ambrosio, while von Arnim returned to Tunisia.

The current design of the plan consisted of two distinct acts. The operation *Ochsenkopf* (ox head), assigned to the group of Corps Weber, proposed deep penetration in the direction of Beja and the simultaneous elimination of the enemies salient Medjez el Bab Bou Arada. The operation *Entladung* (outbreak), task division Manteuffel, was to allow the elimination of the allied forces in the east of Tabarka. The sector on which would affect the offensive was one of the British 5th Corp, held by the 46th and 78th Inf. Div. and Division Y, hastily cobbled together the 1st Para. Bd., 38th Inf. Bd. and smaller units to replace to some extent the 6th Arm. Div. moved south.

The evening of the 24th Col. Westphal flew to the headquarters of Rommel to communicate the decisions made in Rome. Rommel, now commander of the Army Group Africa, had been informed the previous evening by the chief of the office operations of the 5th Army that the aims were directed only to Medjez el Bab. When he learned, however, that the view had expanded, did not fail to express disapproval of a goal so ambitious, irritation at being bypassed, amazement at the request of the OBS "*hold for a few more days the rearguard positions in Kasserine and to cooperate, if required, with the 5th Army in its advance on Beja*". But Kesselring had forgotten that two days before had established in full agreement to vacate the area? In Rome just had no sense of reality, Rommel said, and as far as you deem able to competently solve tactical problems in Tunisia, had failed even to harmonize the action of Thala with this on Beja ⁽⁶²⁾.

On February 26, at dawn, began the two operations (sketch n. 49). *Ochsenkopf* was conducted by *Kotpsgruppe* Weber, a group of forces between the intermediate division and the corps, but in essence formed from the 334th Inf. Div. reinforced by numerous units of other large units, such as the *Hermann Goering*, the *Superga* and the 10th *Panzer*.

The effort on the director of Beja was conducted by Lang armored grouping (501st heavy tank battalion, II/7th *Panzerregiment*, I/86th *Grenadiere* and 190th recon bn.) with 77 tanks, including 17 Tiger. The first day was right dell'accanita resistance from the English 128th Inf. Bd., but the pass of Ksar Mezouar, reached the 28th, marked the limit of advance, despite all attempts to dislodge the defenders by Lang chosen positions on the adjacent hills. The fight lasted unnecessarily until 2 March.

Sub actions had no better luck. The attack on Medjez el Bab, in the valley of Medjerda, was exercised by three parts: the center by the Andorff group (754th *Grenadiere* reinforced), north by the Eder group (755th *Grenadiere* reinforced) and south by part of the Schmid grouping (I/69th *Panzergrenadiere* reinforced).

Schizzo n. 49

The Central and South Columns were blocked almost immediately respectively by the 11th Inf. Bd. and the 138th Inf. Bd., well arranged on the ground and well supported by artillery. The northern instead succeeded with his plan with an initial tactic of infiltration against the 3rd Algerian *Tirailleurs*, left wing of the English 138th Inf. Bd. March 1st he reached Toukabeur after a hard fight, and here in practice ended the thrust. Von Arnim did not suspect that the conquest of the positions that dominated the road to Beja had aroused much apprehension to the command of the British 1st Army as to make him believe Medjez Bab el definitely compromised and then to orientate to leave the area and withdraw to the west. Alexander was to impose the defense to the bitter end of Medjez el Bab.

Further south he took the moves the attack on the Bou Arada salient by the bulk of the Schmid grouping. The two branches of the planned pincer were formed by the Koch Group (Parachute Regiment of *Hermann Goering*) and the Holzinger Group (756th *Gebirgsjaeger* a small battalion, the T5 battalion and the Italian III/92nd Inf.), but it soon became apparent to insufficient strength to allow the desired maneuver. In a few days the action came to an end with significant losses.

On March 2, summing up, von Arnim had to resign himself to close operation *Ocbseknopf*. Gen. Weber announced that he had taken 2,500 prisoners and captured or destroyed 16 tanks, 20 pieces of field artillery guns and 17 anti-tank guns; his losses amounted to a thousand men, 22 tanks destroyed and 49 damaged. He was left with just six tanks efficient.

The operation had instead *Entladung* more satisfactory results. Developed with a three-pronged effort launched by 10th Bersaglieri, XI paratroopers engineer battalion and the bulk of the Barenthin Parachute Regiment. The Italian column, who was acting in the coastal strip, went to collide with the French Corp of Africa, a unit made up of French volunteers ⁽⁶³⁾, he overcame the stubborn resistance and led to the southeast of Cap Serrat. The two groups of German paratroopers, working at the turn of the roadway for Djebel Abiod, found no excessive difficulty reaching Sedjenani on March 3. But here everything stopped, while the units of the 139th Inf. Bd. They recoiled.

During the conduct of operations *Ocbseknopf* and *Entladung*, the *Superga* and XXX Corps had to exert pressure in the direction of the Grande Dorsale to give the impression of a great pincer movement by the 5th Army. In practice, only an operation carried out by the group of Benigni from Ousseltia towards Djebel Sergj overlaid some importance; however, no cause for concern in Koeltz who had time and opportunity to strengthen the defense of the Maktar ridge.

In conclusion the offensive end of the 5th Army it was disappointing. The bridgehead turned enlarged, especially, bought space for the benefit of Bizerte and Tunis. The objectives of Beja, Bab el Medjez and Bou Arada

had not been conquered. The outlets on the plain of Tunis remained in British hands. It is true that the bad weather, which prevented the aerial contribution, and the practicability of the difficult terrain harmed the Axis initiative, but probably weighed more the hasty preparation, the shortcomings in the organization of connections and defective use artillery. Surely the troops engaged on the director of Beja were inadequate and unnecessarily wear out the precious *Tiger*. If the Manteuffel division could at least get the acquisition of a good starting point for further actions, the Weber *Korpsgruppe* failed completely to their goal.

NOTES TO CHAPTER V

- (1) DSCS, tele 0146/0p. A. date 02/05/1943, at 09:45. Strangely the message was addressed to Superlibia!
- (2) DSCS, tele 0147/0p. A date 02/05/1943. In this period the Axis Commands used the phrase "US Army" to indicate the allied forces of central Tunisia.
- (3) B. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, cit., P. 394. 1112 February Rommel added: "I hope that my decision to stay with my troops will be approved until the last [by the OKW]".
- (4) DSCS, f. 059/0p. A. date 01/30/1943.
- (5) DSCS, tele 110/0p. On 02/05/1943, at 22:00, of the Army Command.
- (6) DSCS, meeting minutes of 02/06/1943. At that time it was touched the delicate key operations in Croatia which was discussed in chapter. IV, n. 3.
- (7) DSCS, tele 0215 / 0p. A. date 02/07/1943, but sent the next day at 18:30.
- (8) The Col. von Liebenstein, commander of the 164th Inf. Div., was awaiting promotion to major general, who came at the began of the action. At the commander of the DAK he was designated on 13 February Gen. Cramer, who, however, took office on March 5. Therefore it will replace the interim charge of Gen. von Liebenstein until to 17 February (when he was in turn wounded), Gen. Bulowius until 23rd and Gen. Ziegler until 4 March.
- (9) This is the German translation of the German source document, endorsed by Kesselring in red pencil and with the 10 February. Translation is written by hand on an addition to n. 7: "The main task of the 5th air fleet will consist of the protection of defense in front of the south". In this regard it should be noted that up to 15 February existed in Tunisia two distinct Italian aeronautical Commands: Aeronautica Command Tunisia, oriented in favor of 5th Armored Army, and the 5th air fleet command, which continued to support the ACIT.
- (10) DSCS, tele 0252 / 0p. A. 02/11/1943 date, 12:00 hours, addressed to "the army of Marshal Rommel & his Excellency Messe & 5th Army." Two points provoked immediate and alarmed request for clarification from the ACIT. The term "tactical Mobile group " of the 5th Army made him fear a reduction of the forces provided by von Arnim, but the Comando Supremo, along with the OBS, be assured only by a generic expression choice to avoid going into details and that, therefore, would participate the bulk of the 21st Panzer (north-east) and other troops of the 5th Army (from the east).
The second question was about the real possibility of continuing the effort of Tozeur, at the same time having to ensure control of the basin of Gafsa and recover units of the ACIT to bring them back on line Mareth. In this regard the OBS, which initially spoke of the 999th Brigade ready in Italy, came to promise the arrival in Tunis of two new march battalions of Germans by 20 February.
- (11) F.H. Hinsley, *op. cited* above, p. 581.
- (12) It seems that Kesselring had consulted Dr. Horster, of Rommel's medical staff, asking when they would have to return home, given the conditions of health. Having Horster suggested the return to Germany on February 20, Kesselring would have von Arnim urged her to wait until that date, adding: "*We give Rommella his last chance of glory before he goes away from Africa*" (Irving, *op. cited* above, p. 282).
- (13) Giuseppe Santoro, *L'Aeronautica italiana nella seconda guerra mondiale*, vol. II, and. seq, Rome, 1957, pp. 499-500.
- (14) Ibid. 501-502.
- (15) Giuseppe D'Avanzo, *Ali e poltrone*, Ciarrapico, Rome 1981, pp. 359-364. Relevant commentary D'Avanzo: "*There is no denying that in R. Air Force, in line with a typically Italian, the frightening lack of means and organization is not partially offset by a certain amount of imagination and ingenuity, that They allowed [the rest of] the implementation of a series of actions of some importance*" (Ibid, p. 359).

- (16) F.H. Hinsley, *op. cited* above, p. 576.
- (17) The target of the 18th army group was derived from the indicated meeting of the 1st and of the 8th Army.
- (18) I.S.O. Playfair, *op. cited* above, p. 289.
- (19) D. Eisenhower, *op. cited* above, pp. 185-186.
- (20) The *Combat Command B* was placed in reserve in Maktar, replacing the 26th Arm. Bd. who was being moved to exchange its own tanks with *Shermans* just arrived from America.
- (21) D. Eisenhower, *op. cited* above, p. 187.
- (22) The *Lessouda Force* was established by the II/168th Inf., A company of tanks, a platoon of tank destroyer and a battery of 91st S.P. Art.
- (23) The tactical group of Djebel Ksaira was made up of the Command of the 168th Inf., The III/68th Inf. and a engineer platoon.
- (24) G. Howe, *op. cited* above, p. 415. In fact, apart from the encircled troops on which lacked detail, the human losses of *Combat Command A* was that day of 6 dead, 22 injured and 134 missing.
- (25) *Ibid*, p. 422.
- (26) F.H. Hinsley, *op. cited* above, p. 588.
- (27) L. Koeltz, *op. cited* above, p. 232.
- (28) F.H. Hinsley, *op. cited* above, p. 589.
- (29) *Ibid*, p. 233.
- (30) The mechanized detachment consisted of: XIV/5th Bersaglieri reinforced, XVII/31st Tank with twenty-two M 14/41 tanks, 65/17 CCIV group. The motorized detachment consisted of: XVIII Carabinieri battalion, VI group squad. *Aosta* (less a squadron), DII A/T Group and smaller units as well as 7th Bersaglieri. The detachment on foot was constituted by the 132nd FCC, the LX machine gun battalion (less two companies), a grouping field artillery and smaller units.
- (31) B. Liddell Hart, *Rommel papers* cit., P. 400.
- (32) "That evening - he wrote aide to Field Marshal Rommel's wife a few days later -he ordered a bottle of champagne and said: "*I feel like an old warhorse that has suddenly heard once again the sound trumpet*"" (Irving, *op. cited* above, p. 285).
- (33) B. Liddell Hart, *Rommel Papers*, cit., P. 402.
- (34) Harold Alexander, *D'El Alamein à Tunis et à la Sicile*, Lavauzelle, Paris 1949 p.102.
- (35) J. von Arnim, *Gedanken über die Kriegsführung in Tunisien in Februar 1943 in Webrwissenschaftliche Rundschau*, n. 12/1952.
- (36) In fact, the French division of Welvert had kept only three battalions 15th Senegalese *tirailleurs* and four batteries. Other troops were American: the First Ranger Battalion, the I/168th Inf., 36th and 75th field artillery group and numerous smaller units.
- (37) B. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, cit., P. 403.
- (38) The communication of Fredendall was drafted so quickly and sloppily then and there Gen. Robinett, who knew aversion of Fredendall for Ward, believed he be given command of the division.
- (39) H. Alexander, *D'El Alamein a Tunis op cited*. p. 101.
- (40) I.S.O. Playfair, *op. cited* above, p. 298.
- (41) The *Combat Command B* of the date of February 20, consisted of: II/13th tank reinforced, II/6th Arm. Inf., II/160th Inf., III/39th Inf., A reconnaissance company, 601st and 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion, 680th Arm. Artillery Group, 7th and 33rd field artillery group, 27th group field artillery, 443rd anti-aircraft unit, an engineering and services company.
- (42) B. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, cit., P. 405.
- (43) L. Koeltz, *op. cited* above, p. 255.
- (44) B. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, cit., P. 407.
- (45) DS 1st Army, tele 354 date 02/22/1943 of Lt. Col. Di Carlo.

- (46) Along the way, Kesselring asked Capt. Berndt, who accompanied him up to Kasserine, news on the health of Rommel. Berndt told the treating physician's judgment: "*There are no objections to the clinical stay of Rommel in Tunisia for another month, after which, however, must absolutely start treatment, the which will keep him a couple.*" The comment Kesselring was: " *I think we had a great favor to the Field Marshal entrusted him with the command of Army Group, which could take reins once returned to Africa at the end of care*" (Irving, op. Cited above, p. 291).
- (47) To provide a idea of the continued Italian lack of organic - motorized means in part because discounted - just mention as the commander of the *Superga* he had solve the problem of the links: "*Must cope with the means that we have to better ... take advantage of the connections, the upper Tactical Command transfer generally where there is less control*" called for by Gen. Gelich held in meeting on 18:00 of February 20.
- (48) DSCS, tele 0423/Op. A date 02/22/1943, 23:10.
- (49) The Col. Lequio had reached Hadjeb el Aioun. Because it was *not* equipped with a radio station, to recall him to Faid Sogno had to send two officers from Fondouk!
- (50) Report of Gen. Vittorio Sogno, *Il XXX colpo d'armata italiano in Tunisia*, Rome 1952, p. 130.
- (51) A. Juin, op. cited above, p. 158.
- (52) *Ibid*, p. 158-159.
- (53) L. Koeltz, op. cited above, p. 266.
- (54) *Ibid*, p. 263.
- (55) F.H. Hinsley, op. cited above, p. 592.
- (56) L. Koeltz, op. cited above, p. 267.
- (57) Martin Blumenson, *Tre giorni per la sconfitta*, Casini, Rome 1969.
- (58) L. Koeltz, op. cited above, p. 269. See G. Howe, op. cited above, p. 474, where it is observed that "*the allies attacked an enemy ghost*".
- (59) W. Churchill, op. cited above, pp. 365-366.
- (60) *Ibid*, p. 396.
- (61) Fredendall was known for his way of doing rather arrogant and unscrupulous, and a language not exactly military bureaucracy it. Given the type, the eccentricity spread in the corps. One day the recognition formula was composed by the slogan: "What a mess!" and counter word: " *Porco mondo!*" (Blumenson M., op. Cited above, p. 95).
- (62) B. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, cit., P. 409.
- (63) The French Corp of Africa, of about 4,000 men, was made up of Giraud with all the volunteers of North Africa that could not be quickly enrolled in regular troops: French exiles, refugees, Arabs, etc. The first commander was Gen. de Montsabert.

Chapter Six

THE BATTLE OF MARETH

1. THE BATTLE OF MEDENINE (March 16).

On 23 February, in the afternoon, Ambrosio did send the following message: "*To ensure action of unit command consists is construed Command Army Group Africa that will be assumed by Field Marshal Rommel upon receipt of this order*" ⁽¹⁾. Rommel said: "*Habe Befehl über Heeresgruppe 18:00 uhr übernommen (...)*" (I assumed command of the Army Group at 18:00 (...)) ⁽²⁾.

Since the issue was practically established - date apart - a few weeks, it would be expected a quick definition of tools and operating guidelines. None of this. Or, more exactly, what was made concerned only the operational aspect of the unity of the theater. Little. On the one hand the Italian war machine functioned worse for the mounting difficulties and the undeniable universal distrust, on the other the Germans turned to the African theater of operations a look too distracted or maybe they had, even if unconsciously, already abandoned his destiny. Who fought were the leaders in place: Rommel and von Arnim Messe.

We see, first of all, the two Axis armies. For the 5th Armored Army there is little to say. It had regained some of the units ceded temporarily to Rommel, but the offensive of *Angriffsgruppe* North and *Kampfgruppen* Manteuffel and Weber had been exhausting, not so much in absolute terms as for the reintegration of units almost impossible. Moreover even the appearance of command denounced striking shortcomings: it was necessary at least one corps command. However, on 24 February, it was counting on six major units: the Manteuffel Division, the 334th Division (Gen. Weber), the *Superga* division (Gen. Gelich), a part of the *Hermann Goering* Division (Gen. Schmid) the 50th special brigade (Gen. Imperiali), part of the *Centauro* Division (Gen. Calvi). Also it had three independent regiments: 5th Bersaglieri, 3rd Parachute Regiment Barenthin and 47th *Grenadiere*; as well as smaller units.

For the 1st Army it is due to start from the beginning. On the 23 January Mass was accompanied by Cavallero to the Palazzo Venezia, where Mussolini had announced his new position: replacement of Rommel at the head of the Italian-German army. And added: "*The army is that you will take in order, still has a good armament, has seven hundred guns and about seven thousand vehicles. Cavallero, who saw it parading, also said that the soldiers are dressed well*" ⁽³⁾. Amazed by such statements, when everyone in Italy knew about the conditions in which the entire ACIT and especially the Italian divisions were retreating to Tunisia, Masses said to be aware of a situation

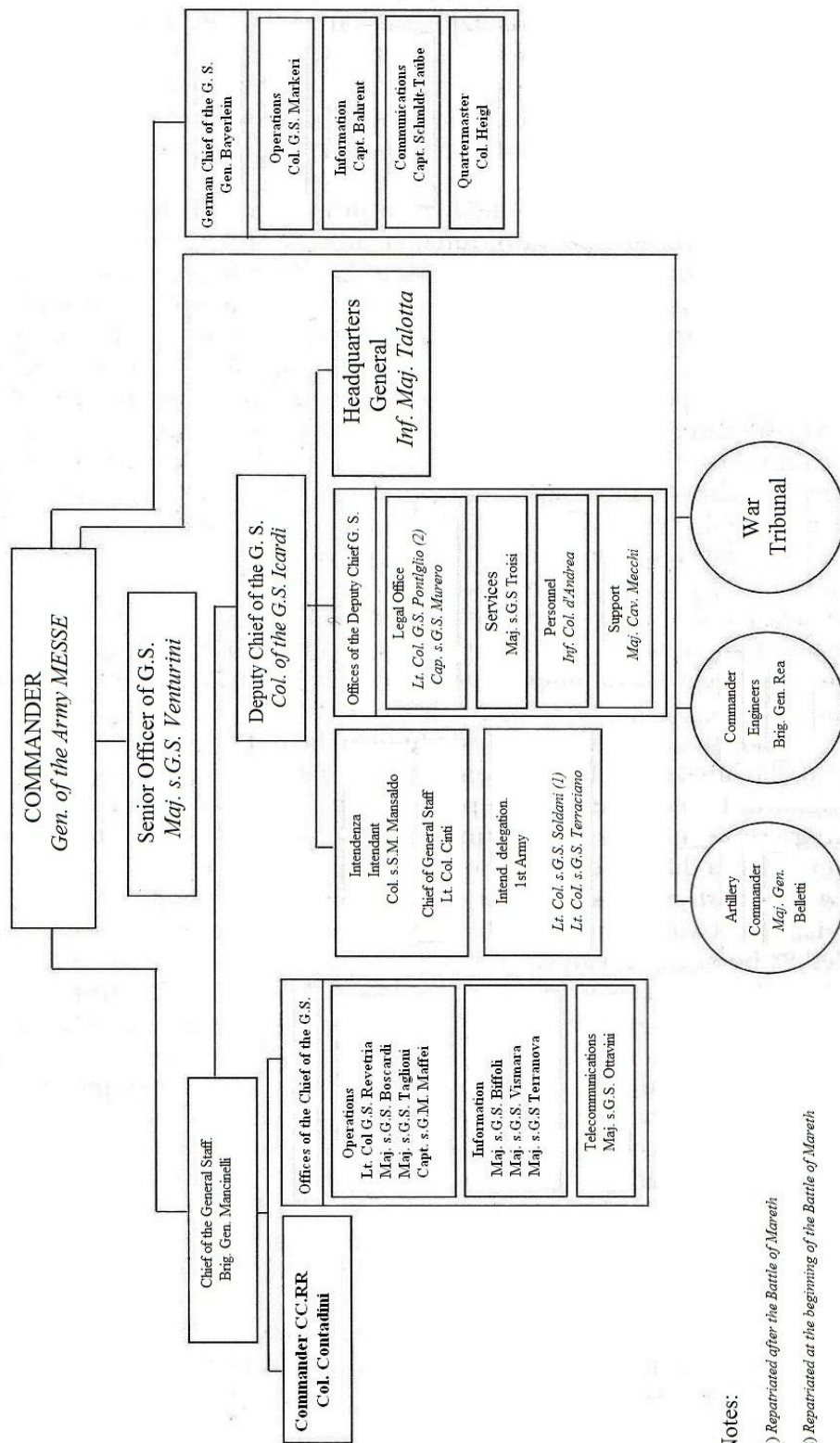
in fact very different and tried, "*given the silence of Cavallero*," to go into details. Mussolini stopped him immediately with a "*Cavallero is back today from Africa and reported on the basis of what he personally saw and detect*". That said, he continued with an amazing Directive: "*Give first setback to the forces opposing it from the west and from the south tend to constrict in a vise our occupation of Tunisia. In the summer it will resume the initiative of operations with a great offensive push towards Algeria and Morocco and for the reconquest of Libya*" ⁽⁴⁾.

While accepting the assignment for obvious reasons of military ethics, Messe did not hide the lack of enthusiasm for a task he considered disproportionate to the forces and means available and conceptually wrong on the Strategic Plan ⁽⁵⁾. So he did not hesitate to express serious doubts about the practicality of the Directive, concluding with: "*At most you can expect is to resist to the utmost.*" The reply of Mussolini came after a moment of awkward silence and was reduced to a few inconsistent phrases, but let glimpse pessimism about the future: "*We must however resist at all costs, resist to the utmost to defer accordingly the direct attack against Italy that inevitably will follow the fall of our African positions. We must be able to withstand it until fall: then will breaking of the tempo and the enemy attack can not be carried out until next year. I am sure you will succeed!*" ⁽⁶⁾. Messe replied: "*I hope so!*" and he took his leave.

Tunisia was already underway training that on 5 February changed its name to command 1st army. It was largely made up with elements of the dissolved the Comando Superiore Libya and had a characteristic: a German branch dependent on one end of the German G.S., with duties of a disciplinary, logistical, organic framed by German units in the army and technical advice on the use of the aforementioned unit. For the first time realized a Italian-German Command and although the formula used (see. Next page) tended to retain some distinct areas of activity, the action command of all Axis units was exercised with great advantages far greater than even the existing drawbacks. It can not be lacking to emphasize that this was certainly a better solution than that adopted in its time in *Panzergruppe Afrika*, I the *Panzerarmee Afrika* and in the ACIT, but still far from the concept of true inter-Allied Command. They were appointed chiefs of the G.S. Gn. Mancinelli, chief of the connection at the ACIT, and Cl. Bayerlein, chief of the G.S. of the ACIT, excellent choices in all aspects ⁽⁷⁾. By analogy, in the context of the 5th Army Command was appointed Italian Chief of Staff in the person of Lt. Col. Broccoli. The level of Army Group will then set up a connection with the Chief of the General Staff Gen. Mattioli.

From 5 to 20 February, the day that Masses officially took over

SCHEMATIC OF THE CONSTITUTION OF THE COMMAND OF THE 1st ARMY



Notes:

- (1) Repatriated after the Battle of Mareth
- (2) Repatriated at the beginning of the Battle of Mareth

from Rommel⁽⁸⁾, the headquarters of the 1st Army lived next to the headquarters of the ACIT with effective jurisdiction limited to a few rear area troops, but with an interest extended to all Italian units of the Armored Army in terms of strengthening material and moral with an eye to the position of Mareth, on which the 1st Army should at first tackle the inevitable defensive battle.

On February 1st, Messe addressed a first memorandum to Ambrosio⁽⁹⁾. He had just arrived, but on the basis of data supplied by Mancinelli would anticipate a landscape orientation of the effort required to "complete" the army and place capable of sustaining at least the initial confrontation with Montgomery. The requirement was not excessive in the group, yet predictable difficulties of coverage. Moreover, even if the requests had been answered, our divisions would remain far from competitive quality and quantity. The problem of personnel already appeared heavy: 5,000 complements needed immediately and another 18,000 were needed to allow the rotation to those who were in Africa for over two years. The aviation picture finally impressed. The southern sector of the 5th Fleet in possession of 18 MC 202 fighters efficient on 49- over and of 14 MC 200 fighters and without pilots, although coming a complete MC 200 as well as pilots for the 14 aircraft mentioned, hopes to be able to contend the sky against the *Royal Air Force* were nil.

A week later Messe was able to really assess the situation. Divisions *Trieste*, *Spezia* and *Pistoia* needs to complete a little onerious, because during the long retreat was drawn to the remains of the units dissolved or retrieved from territorial defense to fill many gaps⁽¹⁰⁾. The *Giovani Fascisti* consisted of two shriveled *Giovani Fascisti* battalions, a battalion of the border guard and three battalions of the 8th Bersaglieri; It was worth to turn it into the *Bersaglieri d'Africa* division. The most worrying aspect concerned the armored troops. None existed, as the *Centauro* "is now nothing but a group of armed troops, chosen among the best." Ultimately, in addition to ten battalions and twenty batteries for the completion of the divisions, plus ten groups for the corps and army artillery, it was necessary to rebuild virtually from scratch, or almost, the *Centauro* and transfer into Tunisia a second armored division or, at least, motorized.

For the German units things were even worse: "*The degree of attrition of these units is pushed to such a point that the military capacity of each unit can only be minimal.*" Deficiencies exceeded 50% of the fighting force, 70% of cars, 40% of armored cars, 80% anti-tank weapons and 65% of the artillery. Nothing was known about re-order Germanic components.

Messe so concluded: "But we must not ignore the fact that men have come out of these enormous tested in the physical and troubled in spirit. Worn have come out materials. The effort, however, would remain fruitless if at this time we have available until the next battle forces rescued did not receive the necessary reinforcement to face again the impact. For the Italian units the most urgent needs are represented by personnel, tanks, artillery and long-range self-propelled, ammunition, artillery, antitank suitable, vehicles, fuel. Similarly for German units (...). You can not forget that the Army troops participating from November to depressing phenomenon of withdraw resulting from a defeat. It should, because regain the self-confidence, they find here, I would almost say they discover here by themselves, that something new has occurred. But this something, besides a new and heartfelt moral action which has already begun, can not be represented by that new means that the country prepares for its troops to enable them to face the enemy in not excessive inferiority. In all now, down to the last soldier, entered the belief that the fight can not be decided only by the value of the men - if they did, we would have already won the war - but from having - the availability of means of not less or almost to those of the opponent: artillery, tanks, aviation. We must not forget that the battle of Alamein the enemy has won precisely because of the overwhelming superiority of artillery, tanks, aviation" ⁽¹¹⁾.

The report was brought to Rome by Gen. De Stefanis that returns and is accompanied by a personal letter to Ambrosio, with which Messe ensured his representation to von Arnim, as well as Sogno, to try to give more organic appearance to XXX Corps.

The arguments given by Messe were discussed on 13 February in a meeting chaired by Gen. Francis Rossi, from 6 February held the position of Deputy Chief of Staff General, and unfortunately the conclusions turned out not comforting. The transformation of the *Giovani Fascisti* into the *Bersaglieri d'Africa* with the 7th and 8th Bersaglieri was approved, however, the two battalions required to complete the regiments were not ready at the end of April for lack of anti-tank weapons and vehicles; reconstitution of the *Centauro* also approved, though the 31st Tank had to limit itself to two battalions, 5th Bersaglieri would not have received the third battalion before the end of April and doubted it could replace or replenish DLIX semoventi group of 75/18, which had lost all the material for sinking; sending another mobile division denied because in Italy there was only the *Piave* Mot. Div.; send ten battalions and twenty batteries for complete units appeared not possible. In fact, they were already prepared or being prepared 659 officers and 16,000 NCOs and troops - which allowed the creation of 15 infantry battalions, 3 of Bersaglieri, 10 groups of artillery, 20 batteries,

3 companies of engineers and other units - as well as 1,200 bulk complements of various weapons.

The difficulties stronger concerned the turnover of the 18,000 men who had at least 18 months in Africa, turnover on which you had to bring little hope, and large caliber artillery systems. On this last point, the feasible was reduced to 4th Regimental group of corps Art. to three groups of 149/19 which was withdrawn from that destined to the ARMIR, a couple of groups of 105/32 taken from the 2nd Army, three groups of auto-cannons of 90/53 presumably ready in mid-May, a dozen batteries of 88 found in the defense of the territory. Moreover, bearing in mind the planning of transport, shipping of these units could only *start* in April. Nothing to do for a good part of the M 14 tanks and all the semoventi of 75/18 for the absolute nonexistence and the inability to forecast in this regard.

Ambrosio noted the note summarizing saying to prepare the answer for Messe with great clarity on "*what we can do*" to not create false illusions ⁽¹²⁾. And he added sadly: "*to say that is all that we can start at embarkation ... since arrival in Tunisia is another business*".

The issue of overseas transport was -if possible - deteriorated further. Having to ensure the arrival in Tunisia at least 80,000 tons. monthly of materials and fuel, it was necessary to arrange for departing at least 120,000 to take account of a 30-40% losses. In fact it was possible to make only 32 trips/steamer per month, equivalent to 60-70,000 tons leaving. In an attempt, then, to make ends meet, it was willing to reduce the number of vehicles expected to boarding so as to bring the payload of each steamer from 2,000 to 2,800 tons.

But this was only one aspect. The fuel to be sent monthly in Africa amounted to 18,000 tons of gasoline for the German part and 12,000 tons between diesel and petrol for the Italian. To solve the problem - gleamed from the office shipping the Comando Supremo in an internal memo - needed the timely availability of three factors: the load in Italy, of vessels for the transport and unloading in Tunisia. The first condition could not be fully satisfied, and the third appeared difficult to achieve. Assuming, however, it was that both found being achieved, the second condition is met qualms for the shipment of 20,000 tons bulk fuel, since only three tankers available could bring in two trips only 17,000 tons ⁽¹³⁾. Accelerating the entry into service of one of the two tankers of 14,000 tons ready for the end of the month, you could have a reserve to compensate for inevitable losses.

And there was also the difficulties of securing the air cover. The Air Sicily took a daily average of 30 to 35 fighters in favor of shipping and 20-25 aircraft for air transport.

more it was impossible because of the 85-90 fighter efficient daily, fifteen antiquated (G. 50 Cr. 42) were used only for short-range reconnaissance and anti-submarine. These constraints sometimes caused unexpected hitches. For example, on February 9 twenty aircraft ready for loading in Castelvetro and nine in Sciacca not sent for lack of fighter escort.

At 06:00 of 20 February Messe took command of the troops already belonging to the ACIT, excluding those temporarily engaged with the *Angriffsgruppe North*, and from that moment began the operational life of the Italian 1st Army. Together with the first order of business, Messe issued guidelines for the defense of the position of Mareth, directives, that Rommel previous, contained two new elements: the function of the "forward position" and the use of artillery.

But first it will be convenient a look to the environment. As is easy to see (sketch n. 50) access to the objectives of Gabes and Sfax is conveyed naturally in limited areas of facilitation made by the coast and through the gaps between the individual outline of the mountains. The most dangerous threats from the south-east coast are those represented by the director, block at Mareth between the ridge of Ksour and the sea, and the route that crosses the desert region of Dahar, block in two places: at the pass of Kebili between the *Chott Djerid* and Djebel Tebaga, and the threshold of El Hamma in the Djebel Tebaga and the mounts of Matmata, the northern part of the backbone of Ksour. From the west, however, the greatest threats are those straddling the lines Gafsa-Gabes and Gafsa-Sfax-Maknassy.

In case of a defense carried the positions of Mareth-El Hamma, the incidences from Gafsa are felt on the rear of the entire deployment, not only, but also affect the far back and the logistical device facing Mareth. If, however, a defense line on the opposite side of *Chotts*, the threat from Gafsa to pronounce on the side and on the immediate rear of the position.

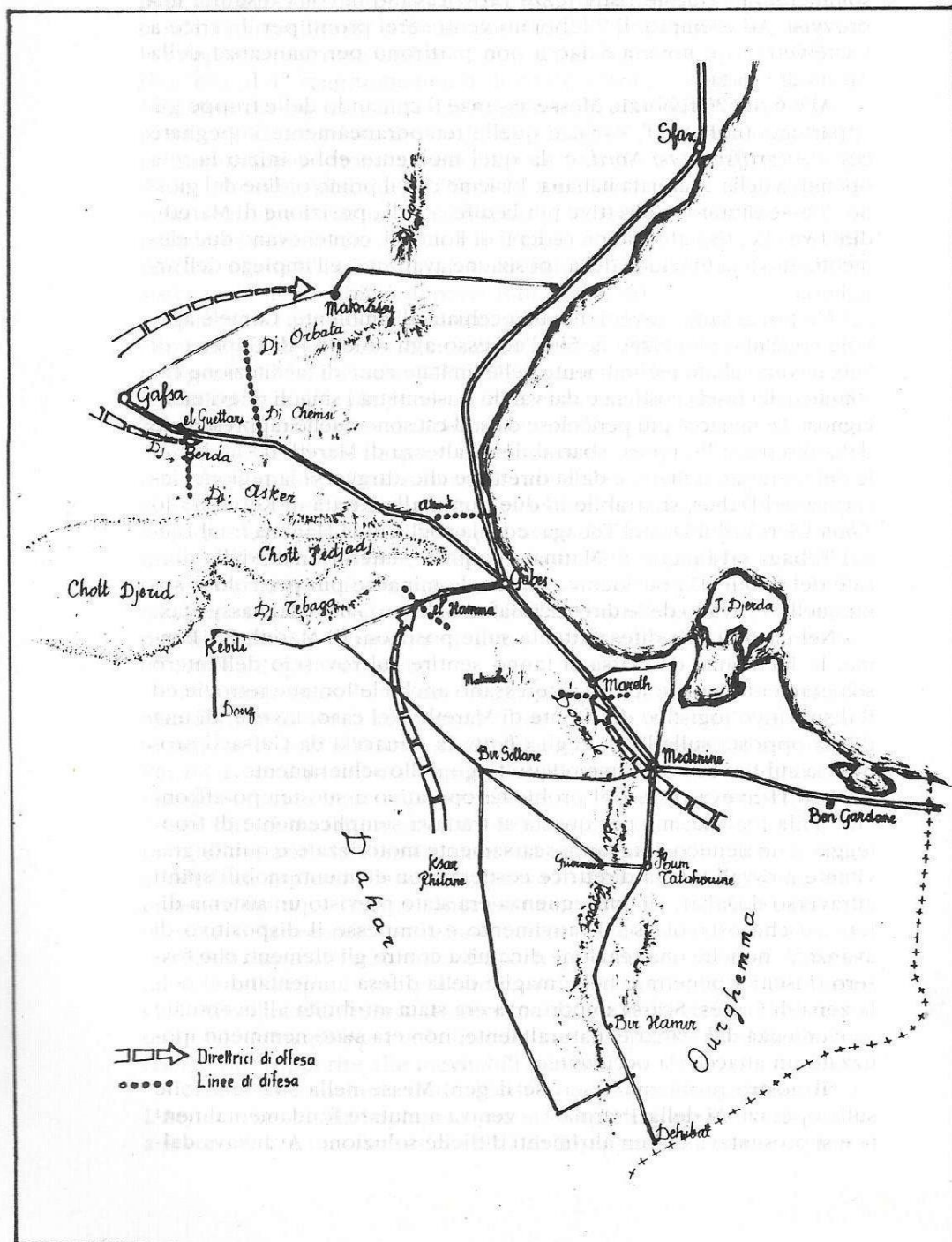
The association has had resumed operational problem faced by France at the time, but for this it was simply facing an enemy, the Italian, slightly motorized and then gravitating straddles the coastal route, with mobile elements pushed through Dahar. As a result had been expected a defensive system that hampers the movement and broke the advanced device as well as a dynamic reaction against the elements that they had managed to penetrate the position of crushing them in the defense area of Gabes. Little importance was attributed to the possible origin from Dahar and of course, it was not even suggested an attack from the west.

"Our problem - wrote the Gen. Messe in his report on the operations of the army was to change fundamentally and it appeared well otherwise difficult to solve. He advanced from

Operation *Ambente* in south-central Tunisian

Schizzo n. 50

L'AMBIENTE OPERATIVO NEL CENTRO-SUD TUNISINO



Libya to southern Tunisia a superior enemy forces and means, capable of rapid movement anywhere, not related to roads, with almost inexhaustible logistical resources, capable and trained to live and fight in the desert even at extended distances and with large masses; also capable, given its military power, to conduct an action of force to break through and pass a fortified system, not necessarily of great efficiency. Against it was not the case of thinking to do battle in open ground, for example in the plain of Gabes, because the balance of forces in the field - especially armored vehicles and mobile artillery- was all his big advantage. To hope to bar the way to the English 8th Army it was needed then look for the best position and cling to it tenaciously, exploiting the meager mechanized reserves to counterattack in the tactical field.

The problem also appeared to us another decisive disadvantage. The threat from the west was a reality present which should be taken utmost account; a strong share of the Anglo-American forces, landed, as we have said, the French in North Africa, let see clearly their intention to act in a short time from Gafsa eastward. The static defense against them was, you might say, to outline forced and not difficult to implement: block materially director of the Valley of El Guettar and its twin of the Halfaya south (between the Djebel el Asker and *Chott Fedjadj*) Close the Maknassy threshold. While in the Mareth defense line could benefit from the albeit brief and not very solid organization of the land, carried out by the French General (and largely dismantled by order of our organs armistice), here it lacked any defensive terrain preparation.

It was always very difficult and complicated the strategic problem, compounded by the low efficiency of quantitative Axis forces in the Tunisian theater, hardly susceptible to significant increase: facing the question: should defend to Mareth-El Hamma or at Akarit? The first solution had the advantage of exploiting, at least in part, the pre-existing defensive organization French, could count on a second defensive position retracted, but forced to cope with two distinct attacks should, subject also to a serious threat on the reverse side that the Comando Superiore Tunisia was not able to cope with appropriate forces. The second it reduced, the overall front, forcing the attack in a limited area and exposed to a lesser extent the reverse side; allowed, finally, a greater economy of forces to deal more easily to the threat from the West, that economy was to favorably influence the overall picture of the forces of Tunisia. On the other hand the position lacked any defensive preparation and was dangerously thin.

Rommel less clearly, The Gen. Messe more explicitly, they had to declare that their preference would be for the second

from solution. The Comando Supremo, however, since December 1942 chose the first and it was dedicated the bulk of the work and the resources available to give every possible efficiency, and on its 1st Army's struggle"⁽¹⁴⁾.

The position of Mareth-El Hamma consisted of two distinct areas: the line of Mareth, facing south-east, and the line of El Hamma, facing south-west (sketch n. 51). The first, rhetorically and pompously called "the desert Maginot ", it was supported with part of its 35 km extension to *wadis* Zigzagou, from the steep banks and almost inaccessible to tanks, and essentially revolved around the old French fortifications: a first line 27 complex of concrete casemates active and a second line 21 field cornerstones only run for a third. All in all, a modest set of preparation, of limited depth and efficiency also greatly reduced because of the demolition work carried out and the degradation wrought weathering. The commitment of Gen. De Stefanis had significantly improved the condition of the works; but certainly not to a significant extent. On February 20, when Messe assumed the responsibilities of the position, had been made 23,000 meters of anti-tank ditch on 35,000 budgeted; 6,700 meters of steepening of the *wadi* banks about 7,000 expected; 68 kilometers of barbed wire to 118 and introduced 18,000 anti-tank mines on 35,000 distributed.

The area towards the sea was assigned to the XX Corp, now commanded by Gen. Orlando, the one toward the mountains of Matmata to XXI Corp, commanded by Gen. Berardi. In front of the location of resistance it had been considered useful to exploit the alignment formed by *wadis* Zeuss and Negev, which incorporated some reliefs of modest height but of solid tactical support. This alignment, that is about ten kilometers from the position of strength, it had been identified by Rommel as advanced to keep the line as long as possible, but Messe attributed the higher value, so as to garrison with larger forces and constrain the abandonment to a explicit order of the commander of the army.

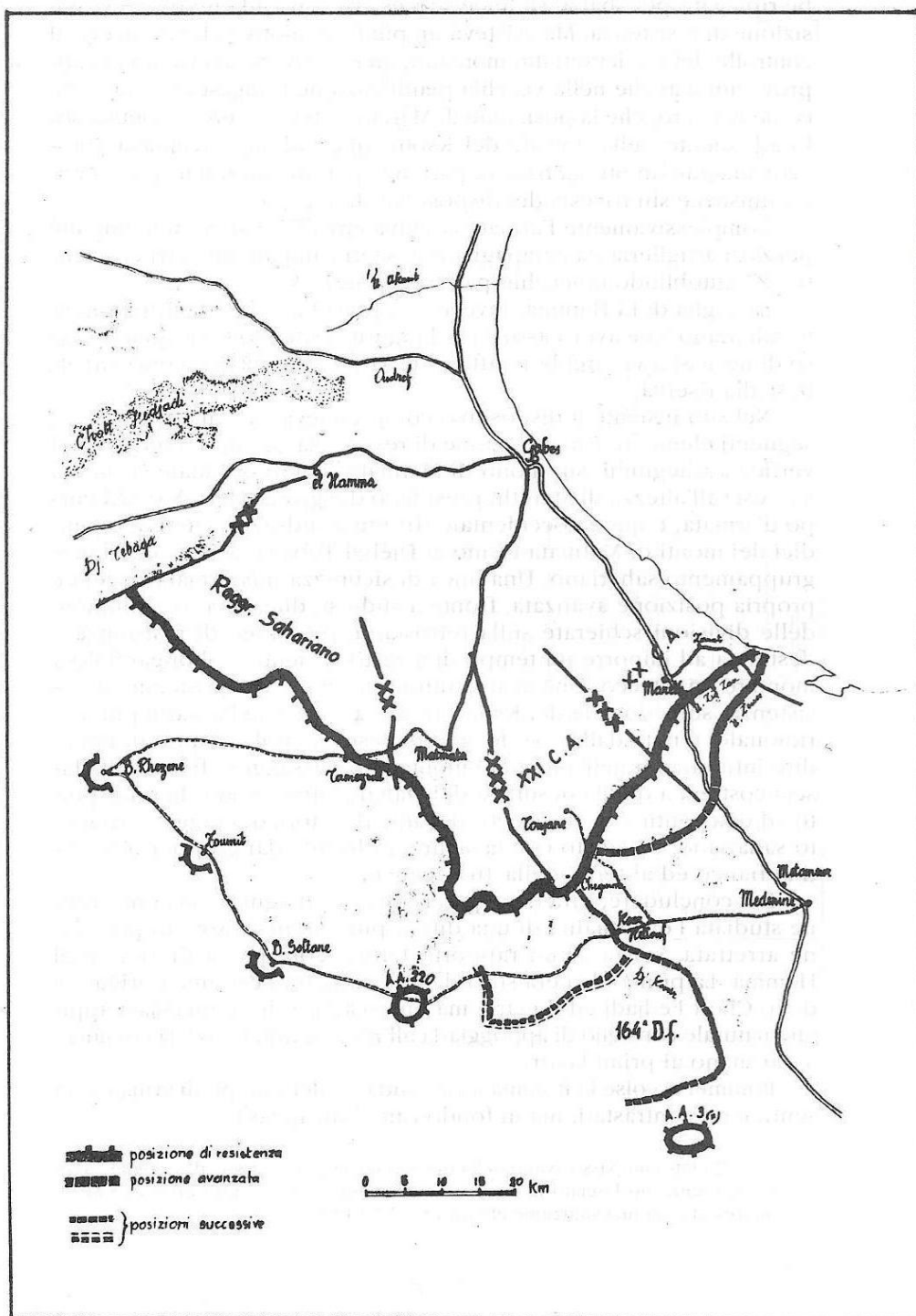
Although the functions of the security zone were significantly altered, pretty much anything could be in the logic of a defensive position. But there was something distinctive that much out of the norm. The backbone of the Ksour did not allow the automobile transit crosswise given the difficult environment and translated. The only way, mediocre, that was passing through the hill of Ksar el Hallouf that from Medenine to Beni Soltane adduced at the foot of the Djebel Tebaga. Moreover the Dahar desert was considered by the French to be impractical because of the large formations stunted practicability and the scarcity of water wells.

Basically, the only way to address the position of Mareth was reduced to a frontal attack exercised between the ridge of the Ksour and the sea. This resulted, for the defender, convenience to take as long as possible a good mountainous stretch south of Ksar el Hallouf, among other well-served by a road along its development. There was then deployed

The position of Mareth-El Hamma

Schizzo n. 51

LA POSIZIONE DI MARETH-EL HAMMA



an entire German division, facing east, with the task to remain in place until the rule of an effort clearly superior or a turning from the west. In such eventuality, the division would have withdraw to sudden changes, on successive lines, until you enter the position of resistance. But there was a stronger reason that induced the control of that mountain section, a reason that found approval even in the old French planning. If it was true, as was true, that the position of Mareth could be addressed only to the east of the ridge of Ksour, it became automatically a good starting point for a counter-attack on the left flank and the reverse of the attack dispositions.

Altogether the army had about 77,000 men with 400 pieces of field and heavy artillery, 80 tanks efficient and 87 armored cars (see table on next page).

The threshold of El Hamma, instead, was manned by the *Sahara* grouping, which had absorbed the Roncaglia grouping. If necessary they would have benefited motorized and armored units allocated from the reserve.

As a whole the device included, schematically, the following elements. A position of strength at right angles to the summit at Cheguimi, the mountains of Matmata, the east side (facing south-east) at Mareth, manned by the bulk of the XX and XXI Corps, and Western (facing south-west) along the slopes of the mountains of Matmata and until Djebel Tebaga, awarded to the *Sahara* consortium. A safety line became real forward position, facing south-east, defended by strong shares of divisions deployed on the rear position of strength and destined to impose a time to stop the enemy forcing him to mount an attack. An advanced structure, normal position of strength, the ridge of Ksour, facing east and, in the southernmost part, held by the German 164th Light, with the task of preventing infiltration in the mountain passes and forces from the coastal strip in the Dahar desert. Finally, a screen pushed to twenty kilometers before the *Sahara* grouping sector, connected with the security provided by exploring groups to the side and the rear of the 164th Light.

Finally, it should be noted that in any event it was studied the possibility of a defense to the north by way of positions rear, with no tactical relation with Mareth-el Hamma. The first idea was to place it between the eastern end of the *Chott Fedjadj* and the sea, but the absence of any natural foothold advised to rest it on the Akarit *wadis*. So we begin to take in hand the earlier works.

Rommel greeted his appointment as commander of the army group contrasted with feelings, but deep down he was flattered:

"I've taken a step forward in the command line - he wrote to his wife - and as a result I left my army. Bayerlein is my Chief of Staff. It is doubtful that an effective solution (...)" ⁽¹⁵⁾.

SITUATION OF THE 1st ARMY ON 20 FEBRUARY

GRAND UNITS	Infantry		Force Total	A/T Guns	Mort. 81 mm.	Art. Guns			Tanks		Armored cars
	Bn. Rifle	Bn MG				Hvy. Calib	Med Calib	A/T & cost.	eff.	ineff.	
<i>XX Corps</i>											
Troops of Corps.	-	-	2700	-	-	26	16	-	-	-	-
Div. "GG.FF."	6	-	4200	56	-	~	-	8	-	-	-
Div. "Trieste"	6	-	5650	63	16	32	-	7	-	-	-
90th Lt Div.	4	-	4300	16	5	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>XXI Corps</i>											
Troops of Corps.	1	-	2800	-	-	39	18	-	-	-	-
Div. "Spezia"	7	2	9000	63	24	45	-	9	-	-	-
Div. "Pistoia"	7	1	7450	89	40	59	-	12	-	-	-
164th Lt. Div.	6	-	5600	29	13	3	-	-	-	-	-
<i>ARMY TROOPS</i>											
Div. «Centauro»	3	1	5000	70	18	-	-	-	14 (3)	30	12
KG Mannerini (1)	4	2 (2)	5000	30	8	30	-	-	-	-	-
KG Roncaglia (4)	3	1	2000	40	-	10	-	-	-	-	-
Altre truppe	-	2	4000	-	-	-	-	70	-	-	-
Gr. A. car. "Nizza"	-	-	300	-	-	4	-	-	-	-	16
Gr. A. car. "Monferrato".	-	-	300	-	-	4	-	-	-	-	12
<i>15th Panzer</i>											
1st Luftwaffe Bd.	3	-	5200	36	-	14	9	-	66	-	-
	1 (5)	-	1550	16	-	-	-	5	-	-	-
<i>Regt. Gren. Afrika</i>											
Ger. Recon Elem.	1 (5)	-	1200	17	72 da 120	2	-	-	-	-	-
19th Flak Div.	-	-	1050	11	-	2	-	-	-	-	47
Other troops	-	-	6850	-	-	-	-	35	-	-	-
	-	-	1200	-	-	-	18	9	-	-	-
Total	52	9	76350	536	178	340	64	155	80	30	87

(1) It included the forces of Tripoli and the Sahara.

(2) Of which cp. Saharan.

(3) Of which 6 self-propelled.

(4) It included the precedentmente forces stationed in southern Tunisian.

(5) 1 Battalion. reinforced.

Bayerlein will in fact be replaced by Gen. Gause, returned to Africa, after the battle of Medenine. However the bulk of the Operation Command of the ACIT became Army Group Africa and Rommel immediately took office. Unfortunately for him, the offensive of von Arnim was already set, so that he had to bear the dual disapproval and irritation of an enterprise of a heavy attrition of armored vehicles especially of *Tiger*. Added to that was the disappointment caused by the inevitable postponement of the scheduled operation against the British forces in the area of Medenine. But really on this reference, connected with the preparation of a mass of maneuver proper, also he weighed Montgomery.

On February 17, the British 7th Arm. Div., with the 22nd Arm. Bd. and the 131st Mot. Bd., had reached Medenine; the next day he entered in Fom Tatahouine. In the inner zone, from Nalut, they approached the French troops to Leclerc. With that, he later wrote Montgomery, "*I had secured the keys of the approaches of Mareth, and when I was ready, I could tighten below the same and decide my plan of attack*" ⁽¹⁶⁾. He actually had a design sketch already in mind:

"In mid-February, the commander of the Army - told Gen. de Guingand - he decided the schematic lines of the plan for the battle of Mareth. A frontal attack would be conducted by the 30th Corp at the turn of the coastal route, while the New Zealanders, reinforced the point of setting up a small Corp and Leclerc available, would move on the western side of the hills of Matmata for attempt to circumvent their extreme north and thereby threaten the flanks of the defense. The 10th Corp, consisting of a robust armored force, would remain in reserve, ready to build on the success and, if possible, to penetrate by momentum until the bottleneck position of Gabes" ⁽¹⁷⁾.

Whatever the intentions, they were pressing measures to ease the pressure of Rommel against the Americans. Alexander had clear maneuvering through internal undertaken by the Axis and the intent to resist in Tunisia as much as possible. Consequently, in the campaign directives which issued February 21 was seen split into two phases. In the first the 8th Army had to break through the Mareth position and exceed the threshold of Gabes; the 1st Army, for its part, would cooperate with an action carefully planned to commit all of the Italian-German reserves. The second phase would be followed the conquest of the airports, blocking the enemy in northern Tunisia and eventually its annihilation.

The jolt inflicted by the *Angriffsgruppe North*, however, had caused such a crisis in the Allied camp the same day Alexander ordered Montgomery to create a powerful diversion in terms of Mareth. The 8th Army was not yet in a position to set up a real offensive since the troops on hand were reduced to the 7th Arm. Div. (Gen. Erskine) on the coastal strip and the 51st Highlanders (Gen. Wimberley) north-west of Medenine. An advanced echelon of services was organizing itself at Ben Gardane and the nearest

division, the 2nd New Zealander, was still near Tripoli. However few episodes was always possible and, moreover, an attempt made on the 20th by the 22nd Arm. Bd. remove an part of the 15th Panzer into the Medenine, although went to for nothing, it was enough to force the Germans to retreat back to the forward position.

It could not, however, exclude any Axis initiative. On the 26th Alexander warned Montgomery that, to his way of judging, not just reordered armored troops of Rommel would have thrown against the 8th Army according to the general outline of the French plan⁽¹⁸⁾. The fact was that the day before *Ultra* had decrypted the bulletin of the ACIT on February 22, where Rommel explained the reasons for the waiver to continue the offensive towards Le Kef: one of these was the need to bring the mobile forces to south for a quick strike against the 8th Army, before it was ready. And according to other interceptions Rommel hoped to annihilate the British avant-garde at the beginning of March and had already ordered the concentration of the 10th *Panzer* at Sfax and other motorized units at Gabes⁽¹⁹⁾. Montgomery said the 27th: maybe Rommel to attack! The only fear was to see him give up the project!

Rommel had gone into action with great incisiveness. He ordered that the sector of Gafsa held by *Centauro*, passed under the responsibility of the Italian 1st Army; also to the Army assigned the DAK (Gen. Ziegler) but ordered that Ziegler took over the command of all the German units of the army, except for the 90th Light was left to XXX Corps, and that even the German Chief of Staff pass dependency of Ziegler. It was a bit too much and Messe interjected firmly asking broad authority to gather the forces of the army according to their own judgment and to reserve the Command of DAK tasks from time to time he thought fit. And he got.

Indeed, the start of the new command structure did not happen without friction. On the 27th Adm. Canaris, head of the *Abwehr*, went in flight to Tunis; He conversed with von Arnim but did not show up with Rommel. Von Arnim's drew a picture far from brilliant on the circumstances: "*Our current series of local victories should not distract us from the reality constituted by the enormous difficulties arising of the unresolved problem of supplies*". At present, we only get a fraction of what we need: 25,000 tons per month instead of 80,000. The gasoline can be brought only by air and barrels [= drums], being too high a risk for oil tankers. And with a supply situation as ours it is easy to calculate, with paper and pencil, when the end will come." And he added, pointedly: "The organization of the command continues to be a total enigma. No one really knows who commands, here in Tunisia. Perhaps Rommel who is about to go home, but is preparing an attack on their own with two divisions in the south before

departure? Rommel is now the commander of the Army Group, but has his own Staff. A control is maybe Kesselring, who also interferes in decisions by the head of his operations office, Colonel Westphal, lying in Frascati? Nobody knows!" ⁽²⁰⁾.

Naturally Rommel was well aware of the attitude of undisguised revolt by von Arnim, but there was an issue to be addressed with the utmost urgency: the "how to" strike the blow that was to disperse the English vanguard. February 28 called all the commanders involved in Gabes to discuss the features of the operation *Capri*. Its design maneuver - apparently suggested by Ziegler - he considered a pincer attack: the 10th and 21st *Panzer* had to open up the coastal strip flanking Medenine from the northeast, while the 15th and the 164th Light would round the ridge of the Ksour investing Medenine from the south. Gravitation effort north unusual because the director would have been a surprise. He lit immediately a discussion with opinions generally opposed. Bülowius held to highlight one thing: in front of the enterprise of the XXI Corp was placed a large amount of booby traps, it would be necessary to blow, resulting in warning the enemy. Messe also had objections to make. According to him the classic scheme of the turning, so to speak, on the left British he had more likely to succeed. Rommel did not share this view and insisted on his proposal.

The operation directives issued Feb. 28 therefore retained the characteristics of the pincer, with the Borowietz group (*Kampfgruppe* of the 15th *Panzer* and 164th *Light*) on the right from the areas of Toujane and Ksar el Hallouf of Medenine; DAK on the left, from the coastal area up north of Medenine; the von Sponeck group (elements the *Trieste*, 90th Light and *Spezia*) in the center, riding on the Medenine - Mareth roadway. From the pass of Ksar el Hallouf group Luck, with 3rd and 33rd Recon Bn., should ensure protection wing barring the way to Fom Tatahouine occupy the airport and Medenine. The implementation of the plan of operation was up to Messe. As expected the same in Gen. Ziegler had to warn that the surveys carried out by him immediately discarded any possibility to come out two armored divisions from the coastal sector. Inevitably would in columns on the only roadway ending upon deployments of British artillery already identified. Messe then returned to the original proposal: Move the DAK to the right, came out with two *Panzerdivisionen* the area Toujane and a pass by Hallouf. Rommel approved variant and on that basis on March 2 disseminated the complete order of operations of the 1st Army ⁽²¹⁾.

The day before there had been a meeting in Gafsa between Kesselring and Messe, this Gen. Gandin of the Comando Supremo. When asked about the appropriateness of the German field marshal of initiating the operation

Capri, Messe - which if he could he would retire on *wadis* Akarit as long as he was on time - said frankly that it would be appropriate to ask ourselves very seriously what conditions the troops of the army, worn in men and material, they could face a decisive clash of the 8th Army. Especially tanks lost in the proposed transaction would have constituted a serious deficiency if not promptly replenished ⁽²²⁾.

In truth, even Rommel was less than enthusiastic. Regardless of the results obtained with *Capri*, throughout the overall situation worried him (sketch n. 52). If Messe considered weak position of Mareth actual data available and the expected violence of the British offensive, if von Arnim continued to complain about the fragility of his long front, himself very critically evaluated the stability of the entire Army Group. According to information provided by the Information Office, in front of von Arnim the enemy had 50,000 British, 40,000 French and 40,000 Americans with 366 tanks, 440 artillery pieces and 600 anti-tank guns, not counting the possible reinforcement of the 390 tanks of the American 2nd Arm. Div.; before Messe were 80,000 men, 900 tanks, 400 field and heavy field pieces and 550 anti-tank guns. Likely to attack contemporary of these two masses there was not much to be able to resist for long, in the prevailing conditions. Indeed, the Italian and German troops were forced to serious actions solely to delay a more powerful allied offensive.

So, it might as well make a virtue of necessity by reducing the extension of the front of more than 600 to 150 kilometers. The new line would be Cap Serrat-Medjez Bab el-Mansour Bou Arada-Djebel-Enfidaville. The disadvantages of running to barricade themselves in northeastern Tunisia were obvious, but probably the reduction would have allowed a stronger defense and, on the other hand, if the current front had been cut, the 1st Army would collapse from exhaustion and the 5th would follow soon.

In addition to discouraging balance of power, the logistical situation was desperate. The level of inventories appeared dangerously small and the landed not reach even the minimum needed for daily consumption. To allow an operating effort any significance needed an influx of 140,000 tons per month.

Apart from considerations of strategic, it existed then the insoluble and tremendous logistical problem. Therefore Rommel so ended the long letter written to the OKW on March 1st:

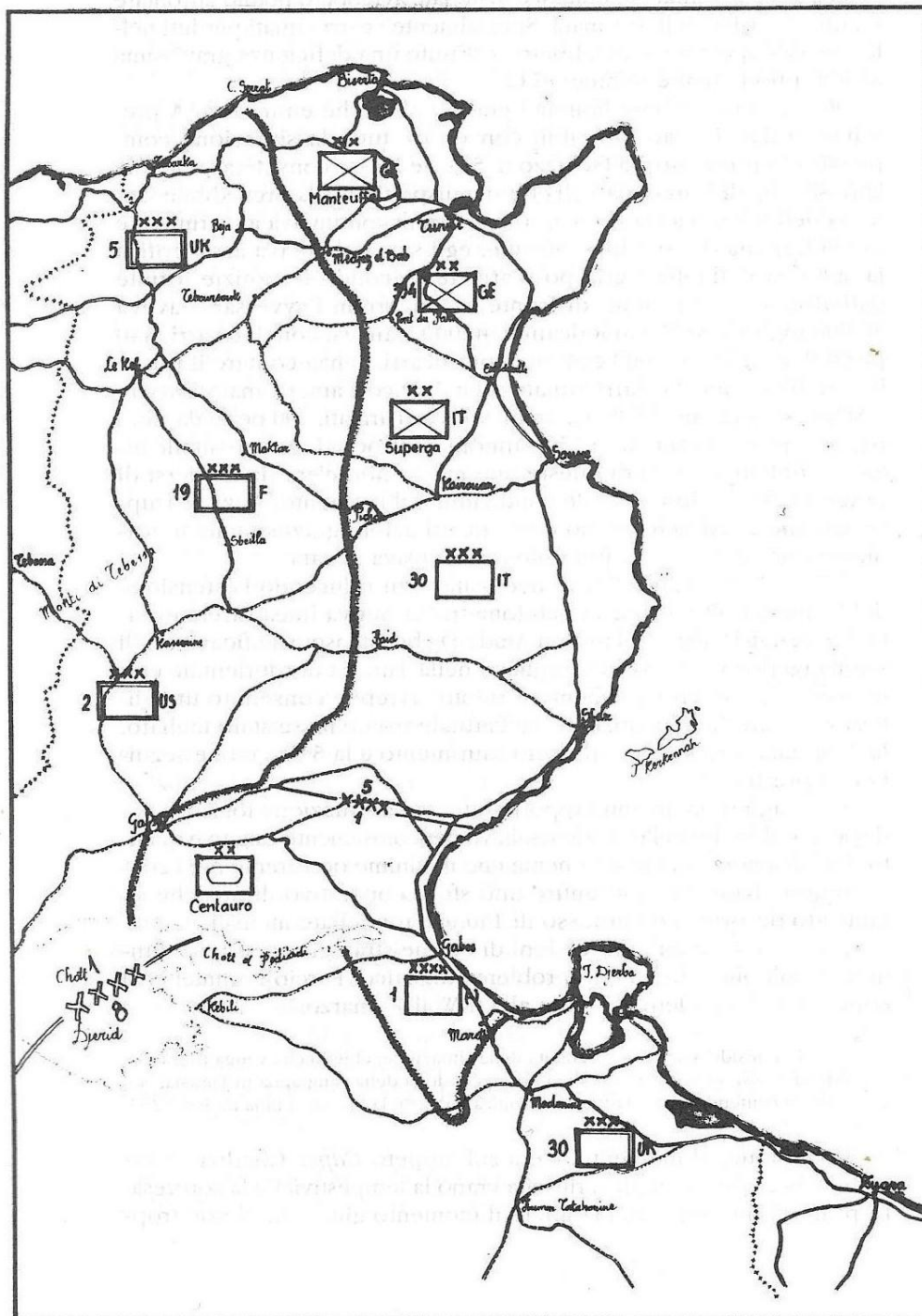
"In view of the seriousness of the situation, I ask that a quick decision is taken on the plan for the further conduct of the campaign in Tunisia. We can expect that the enemy offensive beginning with the next new moon" ⁽²³⁾.

However, at the time, *Capri* was on the carpet. Conditions essential for its successful completion were timeliness and surprise. The first results in the right moment between not too

The overall situation at the date of 1 March

Schizzo n. 52

LA SITUAZIONE GENERALE ALLA DATA DEL 1° MARZO



early (to avoid a thrust into a void) and not too late (to avoid an already robust defense). The second, for obvious reasons. Both missed.

Despite affirmed hope of Alexander Rommel dared to attack the 8th Army, Montgomery had been frantically busy. The 28th from *Ultra* did know that Rommel had ordered an action with the three *Panzerdivisionen* at the latest by March 4th and the 10th and 21st *Panzer* were leaving Gabes heading south⁽²⁴⁾. By the accounts on March 4 could be in the area, above the 51st *Highlanders* and the 7th Armored Division, also the 2nd New Zealander, the 8th Arm. Bd. emergency re-equipped in Tripoli with *Shermans*, the 201st Guards Bd. and some units of the 50th Inf. Div., with a total of 400 tanks, 350 field pieces and 470 anti-tank guns. Until that date there was to be worried. Of course the aerial surveys multiplied and were addressed with good reason. It was not difficult to identify and follow the movement of the three *Panzerdivisionen* much less was difficult to prepare to welcome the almost desperate attempt of the Axis. But March 4 passed without incident.

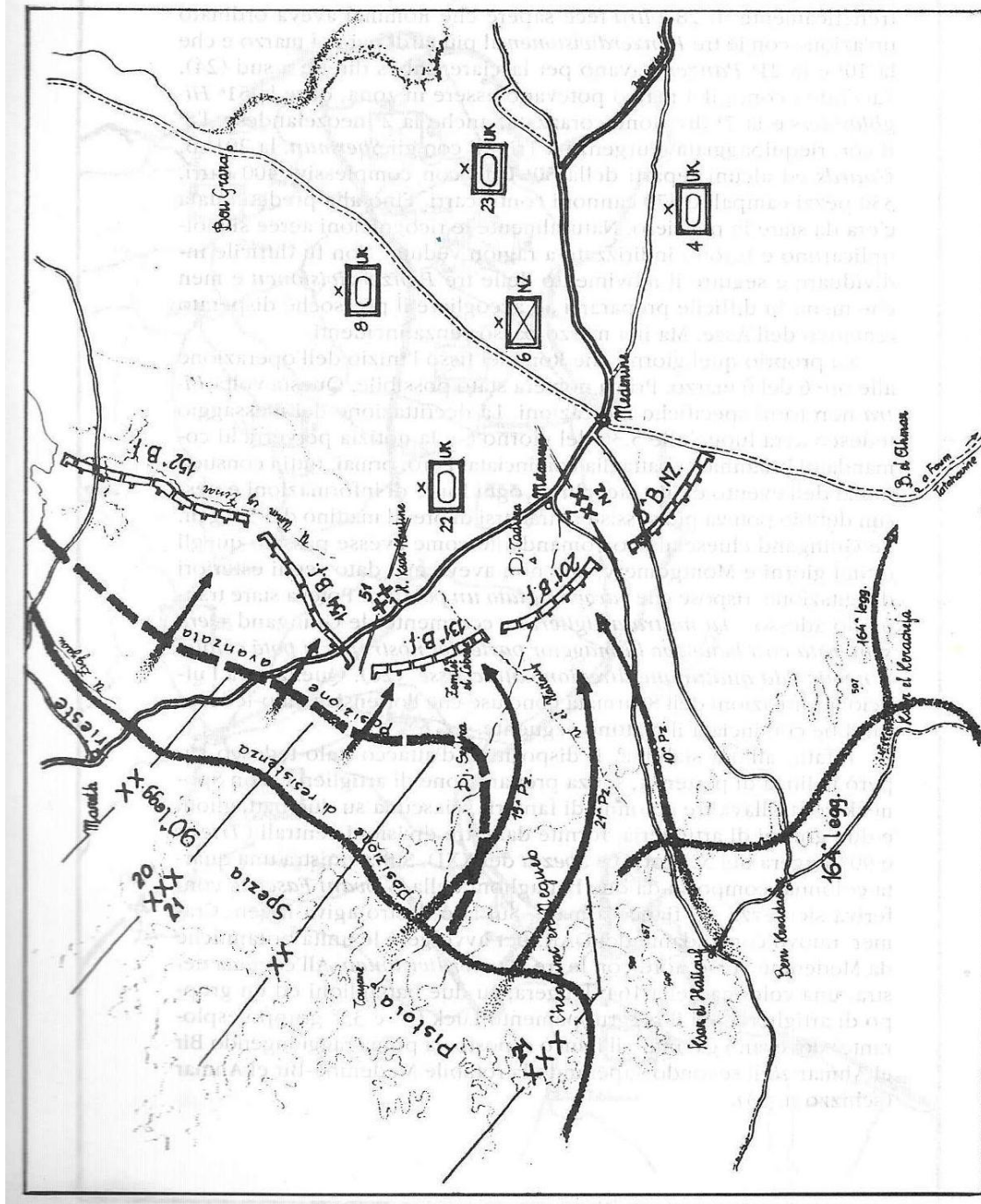
It was that day that Rommel stared at the start of the operation at 6 am on 6 March. Before it was not possible. This time *Ultra* did not provide specific guidance. The decryption of the German message will take place at 05:36 on the 6th and the news will arrive to the British commanders in beginning of the battle. But now, all the usual signs of the event were collected from all sources of information and no doubt could be longer exist now. On the morning of the 5th Gen. de Guingand asked his commander as he had spent the last few days and Montgomery, who had never given any outward signs of agitation, replied that "*had sweated a little*"⁽²⁵⁾. He could feel comfortable now. "*Our artillery - said de Guingand - was deployed so well that the majority of our pieces could hit the enemy attack from any direction*"⁽²⁶⁾. That evening the information office of the 8th Army concluded that the Italian-German offensive would begin the next morning.

In fact, at the appointed hour, the positions of the Italian-German attack passed the starting line, without artillery preparation. Von Sponeck controlled three columns of infantry, each of two battalions and two artillery groups, provided by the three central divisions (*Trieste* and the 90th Light of the XX Corp and *Spezia* of the XXI). On the left a fourth column, consisting of two battalions of the *Giovani Fascisti*, gave security on the sea side. On the right side acted Gen. Cramer, the new commander of the DAK, to flank the British units from Medenine to the north with the three *Panzerdivisionen*. On the far right, a column of the 164th Light, two battalions and an artillery group, and grouping Luck (3rd and 33rd Recon. Bn.) must ensure the flank exposed, the first reaching Bir el Ahmar and the second past the Medenine - Bir el Ahmar roadway (sketch n. 53).

LA BATTAGLIA DI MEDENINE

Schizzo n. 53

LA BATTAGLIA DI MEDENINE
(6 marzo)



The general looked confidently upon the imminent clash, even considering the purpose basically limited operation. After the armored mass pledged 141 tanks (35 of the 10th *Panzer*, 60 of the 15th and 46 of the 21st): less than an organic English armored brigade, but with experienced crews and good material. The aerial support seemed respectable on that small area: 110 German aircraft, including 20 *Stuka*, and 50 Italians with which to pound the opposing sides of artillery and give direct support to the attacking troops.

Rommel led to hill 175 (north-east of Cheguimi) in the sector of the *Pistoia*, where he had implanted the Tactical Command of the 1st Army and from where the view of the battlefield opened up over Medenine. When the morning mist cleared, he saw at once that things were not going the right way. This is because the opponent was ready to fight. Indeed, since the 3rd the command of the army had picked up signs of changes in the deployment of British troops, gaining the impression that he wanted to lighten up the coastal sector to gravitate more to the center, at the turn of the road to Mareth. The following day the *Panzerdivisionen*, moving towards the area of collection, were subject to air raids with strafing. But no one had come to the conclusion that the enemy "knows". Only after the beginning of *Capri* soon became clear that in some way the attack was expected and at the end of the battle, it was discovered, with much dismay, that they were even known the basic elements of the operation⁽²⁷⁾.

At a high level he could not comprehend the speed of knowledge of certain details by British and everyone racking the brain about how certain information could be leaked. The OKW spoke to the Comando Supremo without an explanation, concluding, *"It is also excluded from the knowledge of our plan of attack on the evidence of German soldiers taken prisoner or for the loss of their orders, because the time in question They have not been registered for these losses. All Germans were encrypted telegrams regularly. You can not judge from here in a way that the enemy has been informed of this project."* It should also be borne in mind that the maneuver was entrusted to Commands and German troops.

While, therefore, the column of the 164th Light, preceded by 3rd and 33rd Recon Bns, headed towards Bir el Ahmar with no opposition of note, the three *Panzerdivisionen* penetrated the plain of Medenine. The 10th was aiming right of Medenine, the 15th and the 21st had to break between Zemlet el Lebene and Metameur. They shattered all against a formidable barrier of anti-tank fire.

Gen. Leese, leader of the English 30th Corps, had deployed his troops about 38 kilometers across, at right angles. To the northwest the 51st *Highlanders* leaning on the Zesser *wadi*, whose good blocking value was increased with 70,000 mines. In the line had the 154th Inf. Bd. and the 152nd Inf. Bd., supported by two anti-tank regiments, six 25 pounds field pieces and 130 guns

medium caliber. Southeast had been placed the 7th Arm. Div. with the 131st Mot. Bd. and 201st Guards Bd. in the line and 22nd Arm. Bd. to the rear, and three field regiments and one anti-tank. Followed, further south, the New Zealand 2nd Inf. Div. with the 5th Inf. Bd. in the line, supported by a field regiment and one anti-tank, the 6th Inf. Bd. at Medenine and the 4th Light Arm. Bd. somewhat rearward. In corps reserve remained the 8th Arm. Bd. and the 23rd Arm. Bd. with its 80 *Valentine*. Overall Leese possessed 350 pieces of artillery and heavy field, 460 anti-tank cannons including many from 17 pounds (76 mm) and 300 tanks. A comparison with the pressure exerted by the army with the operation *Capri* did not arise precisely.

One by one the three *Panzerdivisionen* were wrecked on the tremendous barrier. The 10th *Panzer* ran into the New Zealanders and 21st against the Guards. The 15th, the strongest, reported some results attacking the 131st Inf. Bd., but failed to break beyond the line. For English anti-tank artillery, accurately posted and rigidly bound to a specific task, it was a triumph: between 10:00 and 11:00 the German assault could be considered as failed and the intervention of *Stuka* won only the reaction of an anti-aircraft fire "*of a effectiveness never before seen*," as Rommel recognized through clenched teeth.

Although the Sponeck group did not come to make inroads: blocked by the barrage of the batteries of the 51st *Highlanders*, the three columns they failed to even dent the British position.

At 14:30 Gen. Cramer renewed attempt. Trying hard, he soon realized the futility of his untiring efforts. Rommel understood him and at 17:00 ordered the suspension of the action, to remain at the battlefield and to send back the damaged but recoverable means.

Messe followed the operation with disappointment. Given the failure, alerted by aerial survey of a thousand vehicles in motion from Ben Gardane on Medenine and a mass of 3,500 vehicles direct from the Libyan border to the north-west, he thought the chances of a violent British counterattack for the next day, therefore proposed to put an end to *Capri* and withdraw both the infantry and the armored troops. At 20:30 Rommel decided to throw in the towel. The losses were painful: more than 600 dead and wounded and 41 tanks destroyed. Irrelevant enemy losses.

The return by the position of Mareth ended on March 7, while the rear guard, left in the area to allow the recovery of as much material as possible, returned in the night on the 8th. The 10th *Panzer* moved to *Chotts* to be available to the Command of the Army group, the 21st is moved west of Mareth, the 15th to the rear of the *La Spezia* and the recon groups went to Bir Soltane.

"The saddest thing - then Rommel had to write - was having to recognize that we had not been able to interfere with the preparations of Montgomery. A great despondency swept us all. The offensive of the 8th Army was now imminent and we had to deal with it. For the army group still remaining in Africa now was tantamount to a suicide "(28).

If that setback was not enough, that night came a dispatch Kesselring: Gen. Jodl had communicated the absolute disapproval of Hitler's proposal to abandon the position of Mareth-El Hamma. It is possible that the negative response was also influenced by the opinion given by Kesselring accompanying the letter of Rommel, and that is that a decline of this magnitude would give the allies many landing fields to make it impossible to send supplies in Tunis and Bizerte. But it is also likely that Hitler had perfectly understood that the proposal was hiding the purpose of realizing a Axis Dunkirk. However: "The assessment of the situation given by Field Marshal Rommel told Hitler would -so - differs substantially from the valuation provided by him when he was still to the east of Tripoli, where thought he could rule out any possible crisis, if only he had been allowed to withdraw to the current line of Mareth. Withdrawing both armies in a narrow beachhead around Tunis and Bizerte, it would amount to the beginning of the end)⁽²⁹⁾.

In such "circumstances had only to act in person and, just returned to his command, Rommel decided to go to the headquarters of the Führer. He was to summon von Arnim to entrust interim command of the army group and so know that both him and Gen. von Vaerst had been called that morning to Frascati. Furious, immediately called to Kesselring protesting vehemently and of course the conference at the OBS was canceled⁽³⁰⁾. On March 8 von Arnim took command, leaving the 5th Army to von Vaerst, and the 9th Rommel departed by plane for Rome.

2. THE DESPOSITIONS OF THE ITALIAN 1st ARMY.

On March 10, after just assuming command, von Arnim gave a report. It was not so much to explain their beliefs about the conduct of the campaign, As you leave the floor to Kesselring, who specially came to Tunisia with Gen. Westphal. For the 1st Army were present Gen. Mancinelli and Bayerlein⁽³¹⁾; for the Air Force, Gen. Seidemann.

It is good to point out that the views of Kesselring lent itself to oscillating interpretations and that perhaps he himself did not know it indicate the exact dimensions. As he later wrote, he was convinced that Tunisia now not remain that "*limited to defensive action*." At the same time, the situation would not have reached character of gravity until the two allied armies were forced to fight in isolation and the activities of the respective air forces remained free of cost-effective coordination. The weakness of the front was in correspondence with the internal wings of the Axis armies: the *Centauro* and the 50th Special Brigade would not be

able to counteract a powerful enemy assault, but with the three *Panzerdivisionen* in reserve could react. He recognized that an contemporary offensive by Montgomery and Anderson would have every chance of success, however the 8th Army had to wait until the 1st was reorganized and that time would be used by the axis to complete the preparations defensive⁽³²⁾.

Kesselring, therefore, informed that the suggestion made by Rommel to reduce the front the line of Cap Serrat- Enfidaville had not been approved by the Führer or the Duce and that, consequently, the defense on the southern front had to be kept on the Mreth line and on that of *Chotts "that constitute a whole"*. Mancinelli was struck by such a categorical statement is not responsive to the tactical and topographical reality too unmindful of the serious repercussions on the deployment: bring the line of *Chotts*, that of the *wadis* Akarit, albeit a minimum of troops meant further weaken the already very little solid defense of Mareth. Kesselring then explained that the Comando Supremo and the OKW wanted to give meaning to the whole unit Mareth-Akarit to leave the commander of the Army Group some breath to consider documents under the conduct of the defense. Since von Arnim did not interrupt, after the meeting Mancinelli asked in what way the concept to be understood and supported by Field Marshal von Arnim said simply that "*he thought the army must fight for the decision on the line of Mareth and asks it be communicated as soon as possible, possibly on the day as General Messe preferred attacking*"⁽³³⁾.

The report von Arnim focused on the overall situation. Since the entire front of very thin, the decision to stay in Mareth entailed a risk, which, although accepted by the Central Authorities, that remained. To the north the 5th Army was able to resist any enemy attempt, thanks to the environmental characteristics; the Italian XXX Corps proved undoubtedly weaker and Imperiali and Calvi sectors, although held by solid troops, representing a sudden very dangerous; the 1st Army, then, had the burden more defensive because on the ground the enemy would be stronger and fiercer.

The *Fliegerführer* spoke. Strangely pointed to a situation "*much more favorable than it was at the time of the battle of El Alamein*" he said, then the opponent we opposed 300 fighter and 800 bombers, but now possessed 300 fighters and 100 bombers and against 180 fighters 60 bombers (soon to be increased to 100) of the axis. It is an inexplicable understatement.

Mancinelli took advantage of the opportunity to express the desire of the 21st *Panzer* of Messe, about to move to Akarit would remain available to the 1st Army. At the time von Arnim seemed oriented to accept the request, but then came to confirm the order and Commander of the DAK with the 10th and 21st *Panzer* will pass to the disposition of the Army Group.

While some were carried for the movement of units for a more convenient arrangement on a position of strength, including the retreat to Bem Kreddache of the 164th Light, von Arnim was preparing his directives. The he transmitted on the 13th and confirmed the early interpretation of Mancinelli:

The position of Mareth must be defended decisively with all the forces and means. It is particularly important that also the advanced position defense is necessary until the last, even if the forces partially employed on the aforementioned heights to be destroyed and this is because they are for the whole of the defense of decisive importance. It is necessary that every man understands well the need for a defense to the extreme"⁽³⁴⁾.

This meant, however, to attribute a value to the forward position far superior to that, already significant, assigned by Messe. A resistance to the bitter end distorting tasks and functions of that line and involved sensitive variants of consistency, alignment and mode of action So Messe protested, putting in evidence as the tightening beyond a certain point of defense on forward position would give the enemy a chance focus first on crushing a part of the 1st Army, then the remaining forces. Von Arnim welcomed these reasons and left free to decide on the withdrawal of the units to a position of strength. Only, he asked to be made aware of the measure as soon as determined.

At this point something absolutely unpredictable happened.

You have to take a small step back. On March 8, Mussolini had replied to the letter of Hitler delivered by Ribbentrop. Regarding the African theater he was expressed as follows:

"Tunisia. I am pleased to see that you too, or Führer, considered Tunisia as an essential factor of the whole strategy.

The imperative that follows is clear: we must remain -a any cost - in Tunisia; We must in any case remain there for as long as possible, since this will disturb deeply and perhaps permanently the execution of the Anglo-Saxon plans fixed in Casablanca. To keep Tunisia, we must expand our beachhead and not restrict it as Rommel would like, which would mean being crushed and - in short - pushed into the sea, with no way out, given the superiority of the enemy would achieve through the joining of his armies and can use all the airfields in Tunisia, we have abandoned. It is my belief that we must stand on the line of Mareth. But to resist and fight back maybe, you need to *strengthen* our forces: it is necessary to convey especially guns, tanks and fuel. We must ensure transport on the short end, but forced, the Strait of Sicily. To make this happen, oh Führer, I never tire of repeating, it is necessary that Axis Aviation in the area of Sardinia, Sicily, Tunisia, - is at least *equal* to enemy aviation. We have missed the conquest of Egypt because of our inferiority in aviation: we will lose Tunisia, if this basic requirement will not be reached" ⁽³⁵⁾.

In short, Germany must take the lead to powerfully strengthen the 2nd *Luftflotte*, otherwise Tunisia was lost and the

responsibility would be German! We will see the reply of the Nazi dictator. On March 9 Rommel arrived in Rome, which in the first interview with Ambrosio including as by Italian considered himself ultimately his departure from Africa. It probably annoyed because he had other ambitions in his head: "*I was hoping to assert – he admitted - my projects and then continue for some time yet to command the Army Group*"⁽³⁶⁾. At noon he was accompanied by the Duce and was able to explain his position. Apparently the interview, which lasted half an hour, not much landed. Mussolini considered Tunisia of paramount importance both from the military and in the political. To avoid or at least delay its loss thus manifested the intention to send another Italian division. Rommel was correct to reply that it would be better to "*replenish those that were there so could be demanded that they overcome against the British*"⁽³⁷⁾. If you expressed in these terms it is no wonder that the interview has become "very harsh", to quote the words of the same Rommel, but in all likelihood intended to emphasize the opportunity to render the competitive divisions in terms of armament and of equipment.

Irritated and embittered, Field Marshal went on the journey to East Prussia, avoiding the company of Goering, in those days in Rome. At Rastenburg, where showed up in the afternoon of 10 March, it was received with respect but with obvious signs of sympathy⁽³⁸⁾. Hitler was depressed by the tragedy of Stalingrad, however, perhaps in reaction, he showed himself convinced that what was being proposed depended on an unacceptable pessimism:

"I argued with as much conviction as possible - recalled Rommel - the 'African' troops had to be re-equipped in Italy to be in position to defend our southern flank in Europe. I came to guarantee - what I normally do with great reluctance - that those troops would have rejected the Allied invasion in the 'Southern Europe. But all in vain. He told me to take a license for health reasons and to pull myself together so he can resume the command later for operations against Casablanca. He could not even think that things could go wrong in Tunisia. He would not even hear of a shortening of the front, because it would be impossible to then move on to a new offensive"⁽³⁹⁾.

Though flatly refused the suggestion to a Biserta- Tunis fortress, Hitler was also sensitive to considerations about the value of the defensive position Mareth-El Hamma. Rommel tried to demonstrate the inability to stem, with the forces available, simultaneous attacks on line Mareth, that of El Hamma and in Gafsa. Inevitably it is time to bring to Akarit and without having used the strength of the Italian infantry at Mareth. So it was better to transfer them immediately to *wadis* Akarit and give principle to serious defensive works. Similar speech seemed to break, but the arrival of Goering (March 11) and the influence of Kesselring modified orientation.

Following the above, on March 14 at 06:00 von Arnim received a encrypted message from the OBS with the "recommendation" of the Führer to withdraw the height of the *wadis Akarit* part of two Italian divisions "to establish a reserves of safety." At 14:00 von Arnim, accompanied by Gen. Gause, went to the command of the 1st Army, as established in the oasis of Rechoda . for a few hours (about ten kilometers south of Gabes) and communicated that the superior directives necessitated a change to the deployment of the army: the *Spezia*, to except for the units on the forward position that remained in place, he had to move to Akarit; the *Trieste*, replaced by the 164th Light, had to take over from *Centauro* in the area of Gafsa, the *Centauro*, go to Akarit; the *Pistoia*, extend its responsibility to the whole sector dropped by the 164th Light.

To the astonished Messe, von Arnim tried to justify the order: while taking care of the solidity at the director of the main attack, he agreed to guarantee a certain depth to the defense; after all, the concept of defense would remain not affected, since the staggering depth was achieved at the expense of the wing in all probability less committed.

The impression was painful, so worrying appeared the repercussions of various kinds caused by similar revolutionizing. Messe asked explicitly if, once backward sixty kilometers the two divisions, remained unchanged in charge of defense to the bitter end on the line of Mareth or if the retrograde movement indicted had to be considered as a precursor of a general retreat of the army on the line of Akarit. Von Arnim shrugged and replied that these were the orders, that he had nothing more to add and that it was necessary to obey limiting as much as possible risks and drawbacks.

Messe then offered an alternative to a measure so complicated and unsettling. He proposed, that is, to send back the *Spezia* and *Pistoia* (less the advanced elements located on the line) and to extend the deployment of the 164th Light to the whole area of the XXI Corps. Thus they would remain in place the *Trieste* and *Centauro*, already perfectly oriented, avoiding a general crisis. Von Arnim sought permission of the OKW, in the day he received an affirmative answer and the same night on the 15th the movements began. The news, of course, was sent to the Comando Supremo.

In Rome, he had just received the answer of Hitler to Mussolini. Preconditions to grant a license for health reasons to Rommel and the assignment of the field in Tunisia Gen. von Arnim; underlined the absolute necessity of preserving that extreme corner of North Africa, the letter expressed himself as the operating aspect:

"3. According to the submitted maps, the report made to me by Field Marshal Rommel and examination with some of my most capable officers of the GS, I thought of all the possible solutions around the defensive line more favorable to be held at all costs against the English 8th Army.

The *advantage* of the location of the Mareth consists in the fact that in favorable circumstances it has with it the best preconditions for a our offensive action. The disadvantage is that you can bypass the west that undoubtedly exists. If the opponent - as is the character of the conduct of the war by the British - breaks into positions on a wide stretch of front 12-15 kilometers near the coast after a very considerable artillery preparation, fulfilling at the same time an effective bypass from west This attack can lead to first loss of all units not mobile. In my opinion the location of Gabes and Sciotts must be fitted at all costs as deep as a single Corp and the defense will have to be organized so as not to allow the less mobile forces of losing touch with the position of Sciotts. The attempt of a circumvention from the west will also have to be - and that is always as soon as possible - broken promptly with actions of mobile units all defensive zone will, in my opinion, be settled by any means and held to the last man.

I have given orders, Duce, Field Marshal Kesselring - in addition to the reorganization of the system of convoys - to **throw themselves** temporarily with all the air forces on the British 8th Army. It will be provided to certainly send him all possible reinforcements. If you succeed, Duce, to hold the position of Mareth or at least, in the extreme case, the position of Sciotts well as organize the system of convoys, no power in the world can throw us back from our positions in North Africa. To this end, I have already given instructions because, after starting into the area of the 999th Brigade, the ten battalions of march and the '*Hermann Goering*' Armored Division, is prepared for Africa also the 7th Airborne Division. This is the best special unit of which Germany might have. A division whose resistance will be weakened in any way by British and American forces also repeatedly outnumbered if he has enough ammunition and of course the necessary provisions and has also secured the replacement for the weapons destroyed or lost. With great joy I saw that a 2nd group of *Tiger* type tanks, the first tanks are now already arrived in Tunisia. I will provide to cover the losses from the 1st group and will **make** all the arrangements for the use of new weapons particularly heavy and effective. But all this is just a problem of transport.

I believe the solution to this problem all the more important, Duce, as I fear that the opponent will start simultaneously with the attack with the British 8th Army - attack that must be considered as the next - and the Anglo-American 1st Army directed on Sfax. This is also why I think it necessary to place mobile armored units so they can be used as needed. But as a last line of defense against the English 8th Army can be considered only the position of Sciotts supported by the mountains.

In summary, therefore, I would say, Duce, who must defend to the utmost the possibilities the position of Mareth while that of Sciotts will be held at all costs. And if we can fix the issue of supplies, I have no doubt that sooner or later the North African adventure of the British and the Americans will be revealed as a mistake from the most serious consequences (...) "(40).

For the moment we will not dwell on the problem of supplies if not to discover, on the part of Hitler, a jab: "The tragedy is that this man [Rommel], which is one of my bravest officers and that has capacity and audacity to an extraordinary degree, failed for the problem of supplies, which can only be solved with a 'maximum intensification of transport by sea', and a vibrant solicitation: "The answer to this question, Duce, depends the fate of your possessions of North Africans and with it for the two of us a great introduction to this end victoriously

war". Simply put: if Tunisia was lost the responsibility fell on Italy, who could not "*really and profoundly*" study and solve the problem of transport overseas!

The Comando Supremo took note of Hitler's thinking, far from suspecting that it had been already translated into orders. When he got the notice to Gens. Mattioli, Ambrosio reacted sharply, particularly since he was not convinced of the incorporation of the Akarit line in defense built to Mareth:

"Ask - telegraphed Mattioli - at Armed Group Command based on what order were the *Spezia* division and *Pistoia* division have partially withdrawn into the Sciotts line, bearing in mind that this Comando Supremo has never prepared for such a withdrawal. Immediate response" ⁽⁴¹⁾.

Mattioli said the same afternoon explaining what happened and the order of von Arnim to complete the movements in the nights on the 15th, the 16th and the 17th. Then he added:

"In the afternoon on the 15th, had to wait for scheduled communication of the OBS backing new instructions, command of the Armed Group suspended movements planned for the night on the 16th. Today OBS came here have confirmed suspension movements & clarified to the Army Group commander that defense should not be limited line at Mareth but extended at entire area up line Sciotts including & commander predicted that have a free hand to lead the fight in this area in a way that he sees fit.

Although OBS has hinted that this concept was shared by the Comando Supremo, von Arnim having noted however that now these instructions were given verbally & he would be appropriate to give him written confirmation, given also his particular situation of interim commander. As at items already moved on Sciotts line the Army Group commander announced be a battalion & only one group of the *Spezia* division" ⁽⁴²⁾.

Ambrosio replied with a message directed to von Arnim:

"Because of defensive structures running east must be defended by the 1st Army must first be made on line Mareth with all the troops that were committed before movements in recent days. This does not exclude staggering depth adapted to the needs of the defense & the possibilities of movement of the units.

About the function of the line of Sciotts compared to that of the Mareth follow communications.

To avoid misunderstandings, it remains determined that this Command receives operational orders only from this Comando Supremo "

and the next day he hurried to a further clarification: the Army Group Africa had the task of keeping the Tunisian territory extending possibly the western front to the west and resisting to the bitter end on the Mareth position; It said position included the Mareth line and the line of *Chotts* ⁽⁴³⁾. So he closed the episode. It was time for Hannibal was at the gates. Meanwhile, seeing the looming possibility of sudden setback General, Messe had prepared a draft withdrawal.

The reorganization of the Italian army had made progress in every area very sensitive, while leaving incompleteness and encountering insurmountable difficulties ⁽⁴⁴⁾. The large units remained largely below the organic levels (see. organization of battle. Next page), it appeared hoped to achieve an acceptable level of strength. The sectors in which it articulated the defense were, as we know, three: the line of Mareth, that of El Hamma and that of Gafsa. Given the unsatisfactory availability of materials and strengthening of mines, it was naturally the first prime. It had a position of strength assigned to the XX and XXI Corps. Of the three divisions of the XX Corps, the *Giovani Fascisti* (Gen. Sozzani) remained as before because of the impossibility of turning it in ventilated *Bersaglieri* of Africa. The 7th Bers., in truth, had been dropped from Gafsa, but a battalion was held in place which with the reserves the *Centauro* and the others became the reserve of the XX Corp. The division, in essence, kept in line the 8th Bers. and the *Giovani Fascisti* Regt., with parts of various battalions forces in the advanced positions. The *Trieste* (Gen. La Ferla), at the center, lined up the organic 65th and 66th Infantry, each with a battalion on the forward position. The 90th Light (Gen. von Sponeck) had the 155th and 200th Infantry position of strength and the 361st, to reinforce the forward position. How very small reserve corps: the V/7th Bers. and the X Med Tank battalion of the *Giovani Fascisti* (sketch n. 54).

The deployment of the XXI Corp saw the *La Spezia* (Gen Pizzolato) left, with the 125th and 126th Infantry position of strength and the I/126th battalion with the recon in the forward position. At the center was placed the *Pistoia* (Gen. Falugi) with the organic 35th and 36th Infantry, with a battalion on the forward position, which in this sector took advantage of outstanding natural tactical holds (sketch n. 55).

On the right wing, was the 164th Light (Gen. von Liebenstein) arroccatasi around Ksar el Hallouf and Beni Kreddache with the 433rd *Panzergranadiere* and origins covering from Dahar with the 382nd Infantry (sketch n. 56). Rommel had insisted on this point. As Montgomery, he did not give much weight to the French judgment about the impossibility of large contingents were acting in Dahar: "modern" wheeled means of which were equipped with German and British allowed actions deemed very difficult before 1930. So Rommel had said "If the enemy intends to make a winding to the west (...) as one should expect, is the utmost importance to defend the passes of Beni Kreddache and Ksar el Hallouf to force him to spend time in an extensive tour to the south as possible, at least from Fom Tatahouine" ⁽⁴⁵⁾.

Available to the Commander of the army was the 15th *Panzer* (Gen. Borowietz), under whom passed the *Panzergranadiere Afrika* regiment, reduced to just four companies, and the battalion of the *Luftwaffe*, the residual *Jaegerbrigade* and also with four companies.

Order of battle of the 1 st Italian army as of March 15, 1943
<p>Commander: Gen. Giovanni Messe Chief of G.S. Italian: Gen. Joseph Mancinelli Chief of G.S. German: Gen. Fritz Bayerlein</p> <p>XX Corps (Gen. Thaddeus Orlando) with:</p> <p><i>Giovani Fascisti</i> Inf. Div. (Gen. Nino Sozzani) with: 8th Bersaglieri with three battalions <i>Giovani Fascisti</i> Regt. with four battalions 136th artillery with five groups XXV battalion mixed Engineers units in reinforcement, including: IX independent battalion two machine gunners battalions three groups 75/27 XLVIII group A/T with 75/46.</p> <p><i>Trieste</i> Inf. Div. (Gen. Francis La Ferla) with: 65th Infantry with three battalions 66th Infantry with three battalions 21st artillery with five groups LII battalion mixed Engineers units in reinforcement, including: CII Group of 77/28.</p> <p>90th Light Inf. Div. (Gen. Theodor von Sponeck) with 155th <i>Grenadiere</i> with two battalions 200th <i>Panzergranadiere</i> with two battalions 361st <i>Panzergranadiere</i> with two battalions 190th artillery with three groups a pioneers battalion a links battalion units in reinforcement, including: III/47th <i>Panzergranadiere</i></p> <p>Troops of the Army Corps: 16th Corps Art. Group. XXIV battalion mixed Engineers IV Truck Battalion</p>

XXI Corps (Gen. Paolo Berardi) with:

La Spezia Inf. Div. (Gen. Gavino Pizzolato) on:

- 125th Infantry with three battalions
- 126th Infantry with three battalions
- 80th artillery battalion with five groups
- XXXIX recon
- LXXX A/T battalion
- LXXX battalion mixed Engineers
- units in reinforcement, including:
 - Tobruk Battalion
 - VI CC.NN. Battalion
 - two groups of 77/28
 - a A/A group

Pistoia Inf. Div. (Gen. Giuseppe Falugi)

- 35th Infantry with three battalions
- 36th Infantry with three battalions
- 3rd Artillery with four groups
- LI battalion mixed Engineers
- units in reinforcement, including:
 - CCCL machine gunners battalion
 - XXXI sappers battalion
 - CCCXXXII group 75/27
 - CCCXXXV group 149/12

164th Light Inf. Div. (Gen. Kurt von Liebenstein) with

- 220th *Grenadiere* with two battalions
- 382nd *Grenadiere* with two battalions
- 433rd Panzergrenadiere with two battalions
- smaller units

Troops of army corps:

- 24th. art. corps Group
- XXVII mixed battalion Engineers
- LXV battalion links
- III Truck Battalion
- CCLXXXV group 149/12

Large units under dependency of the Army:

- Centauro* Arm. Div. (Gen. Carlo Calvi of Bergolo) with
 - 5th Bersaglieri with two battalions
 - 31st Tank with one battalion
 - 131st artillery with three groups
 - XXXI battalion mixed Engineers
 - a A/T battalion

units in reinforcement, including:

- 132nd A/T regiment with three battalions
- XVIII Carabinieri group
- I battalion of *Lodi* with armored cars
- four groups of field Art.
- a smv. group of 75/18

Sahara Grouping (Gen. Alberto Mannerini):

- 350th Infantry with two battalions
- 290th artillery of six groups
- LV *Savona* battalion
- XVI and CXVI *Pistoia* battalions
- a battalion border Guard
- a mixed battalion Engineers
- gr.sqd. *Novara*
- seven *Saharan* companies

15th *Panzer* (Gen. Willibald Borowietz) with

- 115th *Panzergrenadiere* with three battalions
- 8th *Panzer* with two battalions
- 33rd artillery with three groups
- various units
- units in the employ of the div.:
 - 288th *Panzergrenadiere Afrika*
 - Luftwaffenjager* Battalion

19th Flak Div. (Gen. Gothard Franz) with:

- 102nd A/A artillery with four groups
- 135th A/A artillery with three groups

Army troops:

- 8th Art. Regt. of the Army with three groups
- 2nd A/A Art. Regt. with three groups
- 37th A/A Art. Regt. with five groups
- 39th A/A Art. Regt. with two groups
- 50th A/A Art. Regt. with two groups
- 34th costal Art. Regt. (sector Sfax)
- 280th G.a.f. Art. Regt. (Sector Gabes)
- 7th Engineers Regt.
- 2nd special Engineers Group.

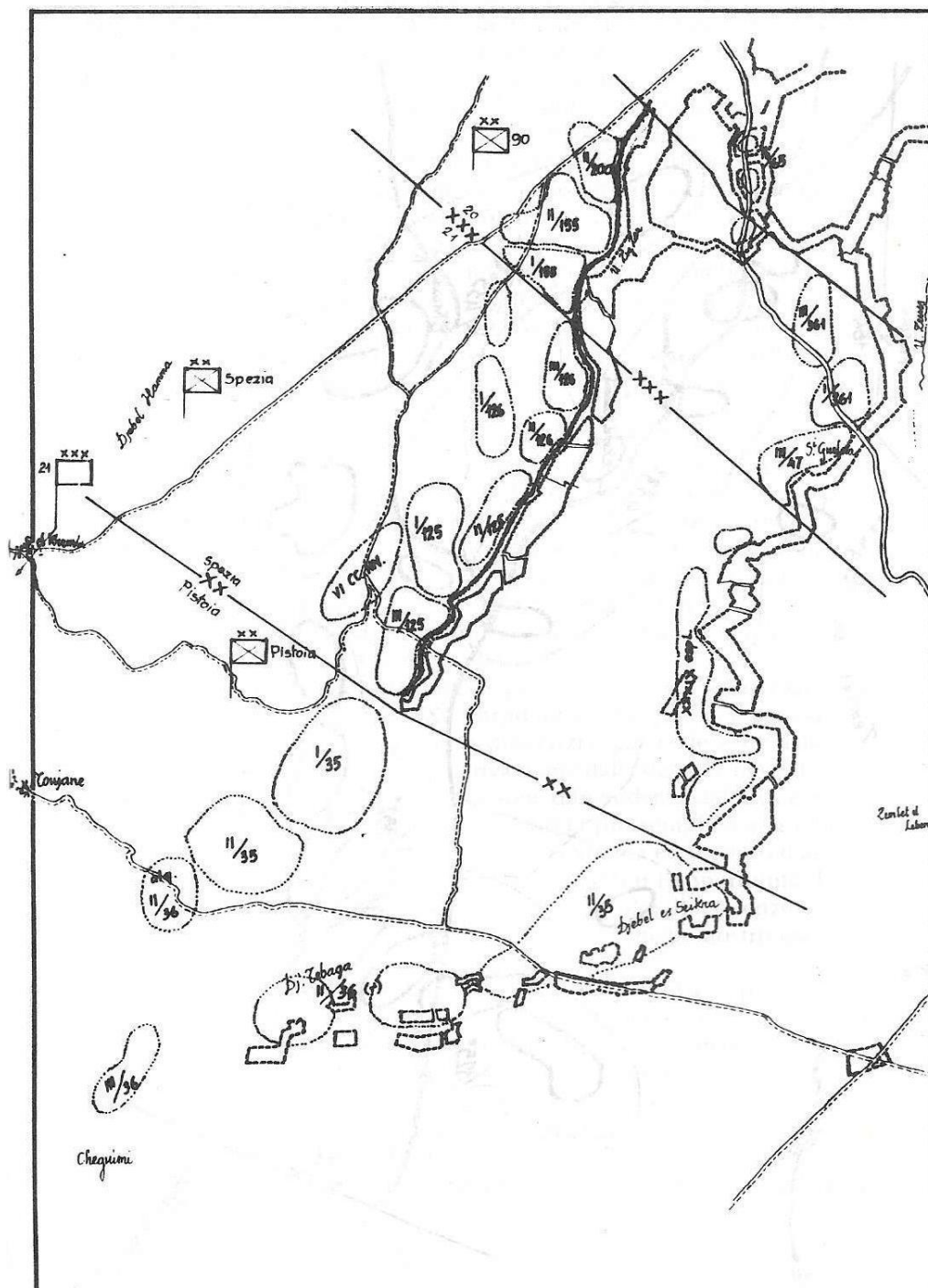
- III gr. armored car *Monferrato*
- III gr. armored cars *Nizza*
- 3rd Recon Bn German
- 33rd Recon Bn German
- XXV Machine Gun battalion
- CCLXXI machine-gun battalion

Schizzo n. 54

The area of XXI Corp on the line of Mareth

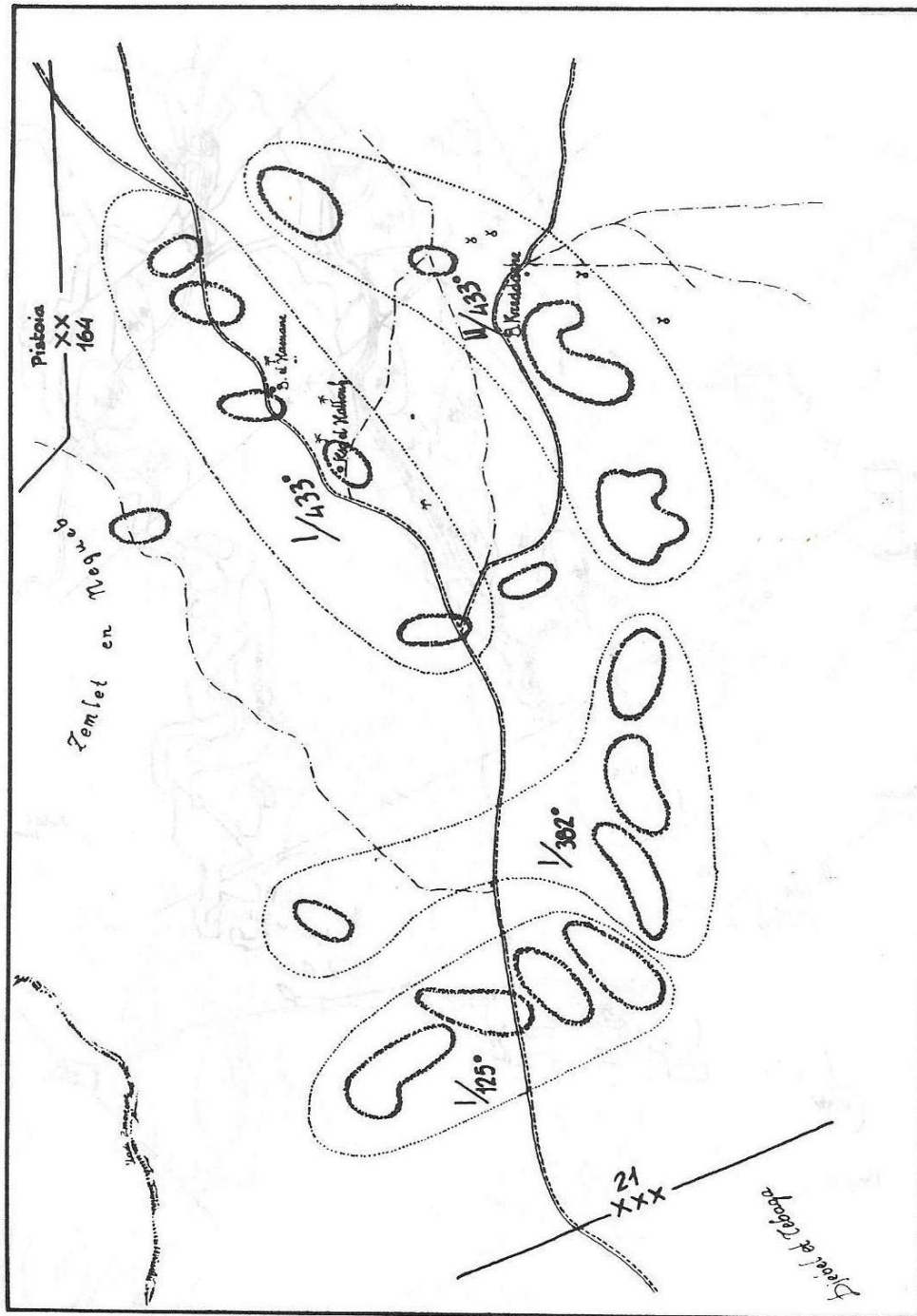
Schizzo n. 55

IL SETTORE DEL XXI CORPO SULLA LINEA DI MARETH



Schizzo n. 56

IL SETTORE DELLA 164^a LEGGERA SULLA LINEA DI MARETH



As artillery, it seems useful for some comment. The share of the heavy field and heavy was part of the 8th Art. group of the army, two groups 149/35 and one 149/90, as well as the 16th and 24th group of army corps art. with two groups of 105/28 and one of 88 or 90. Really just as quantity and quality. Suffice to placing to the 90th Light, was equipped with one group of 88, one of 105 and one of 155. To this was added the severe shortage of ammunition. The existence did not exceed 5 *unfoc* for small calibers, and 1.5 *unfoc* for medium caliber weapons, it ranged from 3 to 5 *unfoc* for anti-aircraft pieces and was around 2.5 for anti-tank cannons. The German artillery possessed roughly 1 *unfoc*. The result was the order, given just at the eve of the battle, to give up the counter-battery, except in particularly favorable cases. This says it all.

Apart from the deficiencies of ballistic and mechanical quality of the guns and the insufficient supply of ammunition, he would definitely come back to the fire maneuver. So the artillery were taken in hand, conveniently grouped and coordinated a plan of employment suitable to get the intervention on the ground where necessary.

A few words on the unit logistics. In late February, in agreement with the German part, the G.S. of the Army he had made significant changes to the initial organization of the services. At the level of the Army Group had entered into function a Upper Africa stewardship, ruled by a German officer but with a mixed G.S., with the task of ensuring discharges to Tunisian ports and supplies up to warehouses of the army. By that body depended three Intendenze: the Italian Tunisia, the Italian one for the R. Air Force and the German Tunisia.

The first (Col. Mansoldo) had to provide food logistics of the 1st Army and the XXX Corps through two Intendenza delegations. As a result, the normal organic services of the aforementioned major units were absorbed respectively by the Superintendency of delegation of the army and the Superintendency of Delegation of the XXX Corp. It's hard to say if this structure were the easiest and the most appropriate, since functionally the army and the army corps already had logistic rings. Probably influenced the opportunity to put all the Italian troops and services in Tunisia to direct or at least discipline employed by the commander of the 1st Army, our highest military official in Africa.

The Superintendency of delegation of the 1st Army had implanted logistics centers in Gabes, Sfax and Mahares. Inevitably unlimited inventory levels weighed negatively on the operation of many services, even if the minimum distances to be overcome posed the problem as a whole far less difficulty than in previous campaigns. Moreover, the already poor availability of trucks was invalidated by a good 40% of inefficient means, percentage caused not so much by the severity of the damage or reduced capacities.

workshops, but rather a lack of spare parts.

On the El Hamma line was deployed *Saharan* grouping of Gen. Mannerini, consisting of 350th Infantry with two battalions, three organic battalions of complements, and a border guard, the *Novara* squ. group, 290th artillery with five groups 77/28 and one of 75/27, more minor divisions including two German 88 batteries. Isolated, at Kebili, were the Saharan de Valle group companies and III *Monferrato* armored cars group, in charge of striking through local tracks. It was considered a front, for the moment at least, less chance of injury, however, the terrestrial and aerial exploration carefully followed the progressive enemy allocation (it was the French column of Gen. Leclerc) in the Ksar Rhilane area, in the desert of Dahar. A raid conducted on March 10 by the Luck grouping with the 3rd and 33rd Recon Bn. reinforced by Italian troops had inflicted losses on the opponent, but overall the result was not the one hoped, to eliminate a possible cause for concern.

Finally, in the Gafsa area, the *Centauro* (Gen. Calvi of Bergolo) held a front of seventy kilometers with a complex of diverse forces⁽⁴⁶⁾ rich enough of cannon but very poor in infantry, limited to XII/7th Bers., a company XIV /5th Bers. and a small battalion of stormtroopers *Marano* format with stranded elements of the 31st Tank. On the other hand had the XIV/31st Tank with 18 tanks and two self-propelled, I *Reco Lodi* Group and some armored cars of the PAI. Forming the backbone of the defense 132nd A/T regiment and a small caliber artillery grouping. The first was made up of the remnants of the tank crewmen of the *Littorio*, of the *Ariete* and the *Trieste*, the second by elements of the dissolved regiments of artillery. Both poor of everything, literally.

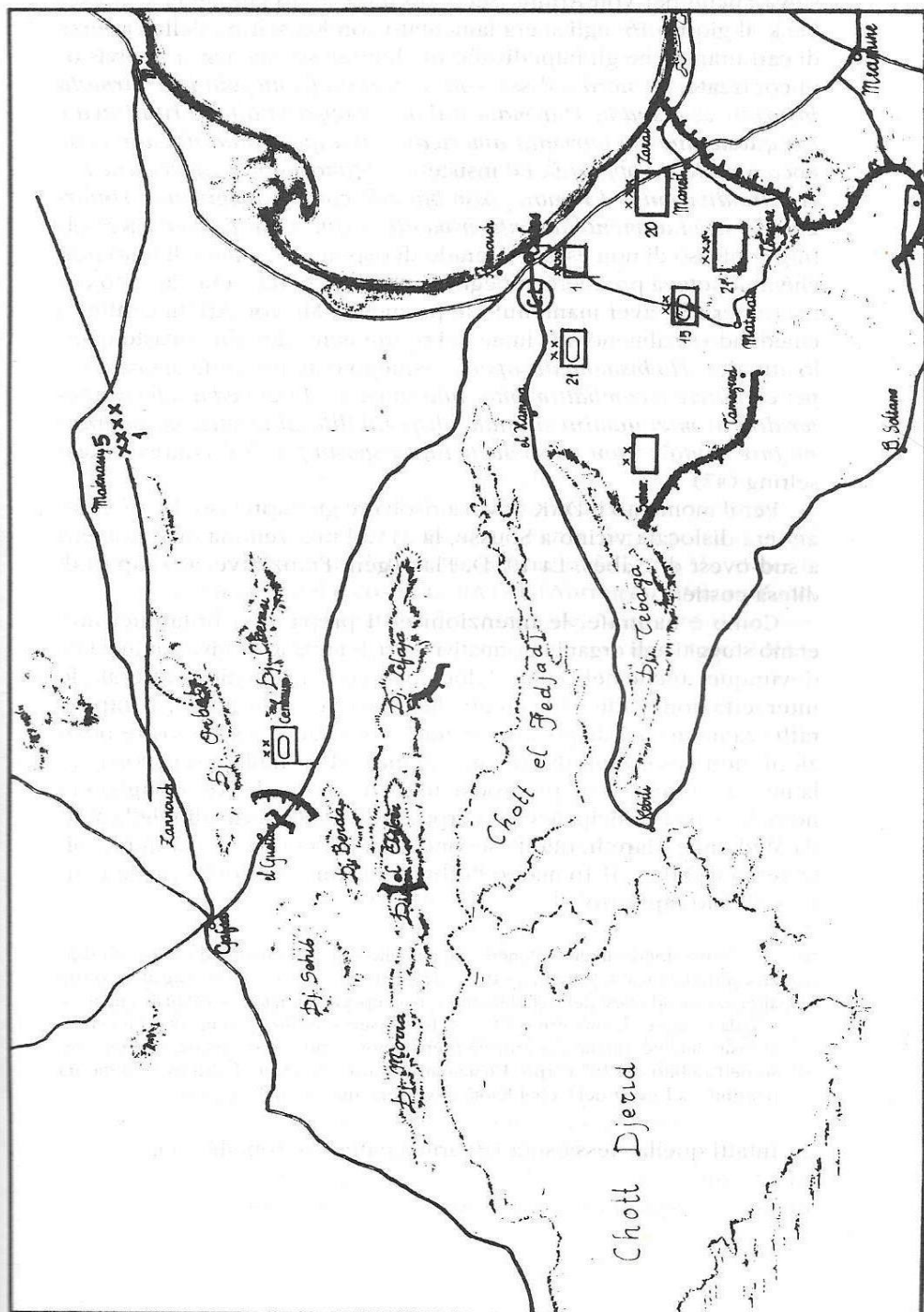
The main drawback of the *Centauro* deployment stemmed from subtle or no wing support. Gen. Calvi had placed the bulk of the division as the barrier from the direction of Gafsa -El Guettar-Sfax / Gabes, between Djebel Orbata and the Djebel Djebel Berda, forming a kind of arch with the concavity facing west. Towards El Guettar, an isolated stronghold. A detachment, initially pushed to Tozeur, was set back to Djebel Asker and gave a minimum of security to the left. Another had led to Sened to seek contact with the 50th Special Brigade. Forward, in Gafsa, are mobile elements with the task of opposing flexible resistance the enemy advance (sketch n. 57).

The Gafsa sector Messe did not like at all. It was too eccentric for relations away and partitioning of land, compared to the position of El Hamma and Mareth-necessarily inserted in a tactical whole that had nothing to do with the essence of the army's operational problem. Repeated requests to von Arnim to understand a totally unique *Centauro* and the special brigade (or

The deployment of the *Centauro* in the area of Gafsa

Schizzo n. 57

LO SCHIERAMENTO DELLA *CENTAURO* SULLA LINEA DI GAFSA



part of it), directly under the control of the Army Group, will find acceptance only during battle.

However, for objectivity, we must recognize that the problem also existed for von Arnim. According to the story that von Eisebeck tells, on the 16th, he had complained to Kesselring of fuel shortages that prevented any movement of armored divisions. "*North - he said - the 5th Army faces the British 1st Army, the south the Italian 1st Army has opposed the British 8th and between these two is the American army to which we have little or nothing to oppose*". And he insisted: "*I estimate the forces of three divisions and I can not defeat with a reinforced regiment. Where the increase of supplies ordered by the Führer?*" Kesselring confessed to not being able to respond, first of all because he could not make commitments and then secure it had already been criticized for failing to keep his promises. But von Arnim kept wondering if at least the volume of supplies would remain the current one: "*I need to know - he explained with some bitterness - to lead the battle on the line of Mareth and also to be able to tell my men on whom the availability of ammunition should to account.*" "*I can not give a precise answer*" confessed Kesselring⁽⁴⁷⁾.

For the moment, the DAK had to solve the unexpected. The 10th Panzer was stationed near Sousse, the 21st twenty kilometers south-west of Gabes. The 19th Flak Div. (Gen. Franz) had the task of coastal defense.

As is natural, British intentions and preparations had not escaped to the organs of information of the 1st Army. Increased activity everywhere, even in Dahar, documents and captured prisoners, the radio intercepts, the results of aerial surveys, the rapid strengthening of the enemy deployment in contact with the our positions, left no doubt that, at least in the coastal strip, the development was almost complete. The picture of the battle was known, the main mass (30th Corps) located astride the Medenine - Mareth road, secondary (10th Corps) in the process of collection at Dahar. On March 16, the information office of the army had completed its report:

"It can be stated that the enemy intends to make the maximum effort against the line of Mareth, straddling the coastal road, subsidizing such an attack with other action west of the *Jebel Ksour*. About the time of the enemy offensive began, there has to be considered that while the 30th Corp has already tightened in the area in advance and has probably completed its preparation, movements are still being undertaken in the 10th Corp. An enemy action in the coastal sector is even now possible; West of the *Jebel Ksour* need a few more days. "

In fact, that evening the 8th Army attacked frontally.

3. OPERATION "PUGILIST" (March 20 to 28)

On March 14, Alexander issued directives for the conquest of Tunisia. First he articulated the 18th Army Group in three parts - the British 1st Army, the American 2nd Corp, the British 8th Army - taking into the reserve the British 9th Corp. Then it was explicit in demanding full respect not only the sub-unit, but also of the national course as permitted by the circumstances: the French 19th Corp had to operate united within the 1st Army. Other criteria that concerned the convenience for every Corp to keep a division, infantry or armored, in reserve and, above all, the need to remove from the front line armored units to reserve them for the dynamics reaction.

Alexander also lingered on air forces. Since the beginning of January it was pointed out in no uncertain terms the problem of coordination of air units pattern with *Torch* and those from the Libyan desert. After a series of partial measures, on February 18 had come to life and the substance NAAF (*Northwest African Air Force*) under the command of American General Spaatz. Form the NAAF depended: the NASAf (*Northwest African Strategic Air Force*) of Gen. Doolittle with tasks of strategic bombing; the NACAF (*Northwest African Coastal Air Force*, Air Force Coast of 'Africa's North West) Air Vice Marshal Lloyd for the defense of shipping and the coast; the NATAF (*Northwest African Tactical Air Force*) Air Marshal Coningham the tactical support of the armies; the NAASC (*Northwest African Air Service Command*) of Gen. Dunton for logistical assistance. On March 18, will also be formed the NATCC (*Northwest African Troop Carrier Command*) of Col. Dunn.

The NATAF had employed the American XII *Air Support Command* and the RAF 242nd Group⁽⁴⁸⁾ in Algeria and Tunisia in the West, and the *Western Desert Air Force* in southern Tunisia and Tripolitania. To ensure better cooperation between air and land commands, Coningham pointed to the job training at the highest level: the 242nd Group with the 1st Army, the XII *Air Support Command* with the American 2nd Corp and the *Western Desert Air Force* (essentially based on the strength of the 211th Group) with the 8th Army. Moreover, on the eve of the Battle of Mareth, formed organically the NATBF (*Northwest African Tactical Bomber Force*) under the command of Air Commodore Sinclair for the bombing in tactical field .

According to the directives issued by Coningham on 11 March, the WDAF was mainly act in favor of the 8th Army, while the 242nd Group and the XX *Air Support Command* had the tasks to force

Axis to accept the air battle and to attack airports. When the Italian 1st army had started to retreat to the north, the *Western Desert Air Force* and *XII Air Support Command* would be thrown on it, while the 242nd *Group* in would have been raging about airports in northeastern Tunisia with the assistance of NASAF.

This was in line with what prescribed by Alexander: Command tactical air force was to control and to proportion the needs for air intervention for the armies and corps. But the commander of the 18th Army Group pointed out two other needs: as long as the campaign had to be borne in mind and then study how to prevent evacuation of the troops of the Axis; at the end of the struggle in Tunisia air forces would immediately received new tasks ⁽⁴⁹⁾.

On March 15, Alexander was installed northwest of Tebessa, near the American 2nd Corp. Montgomery since February 26 had decided on March 20 as a day D, to make sure the development of the preparations. The completion of the equipment and the stockpiling of large stocks deemed -with much broadmindedness - essential not give, however, thought. On 11 March Gen. Miller, chief of logistics of the Army Group, reported that in Tripoli daily exceeded 3,000 tons of discharge (with a tip, exceptionally, to 7,000) and would soon reach the level of 4,000. So in this respect there was no worry of delays. Rather, Montgomery had posed an important question: if the position of Mareth had been smashed after fierce resistance, on what he could count for logistical support for a vigorous exploitation of the success in depth?

There was only one solution: establish a large logistics center in Gafsa in favor of the mobile forces of the 8th Army and open a new channel of supply from Gafsa to Maknassy. But it was necessary to make it a preliminary operation on a limited target. It was dedicated that 2nd Corp, now commanded by Gen. Patton, thus achieving various goals: create the conditions for the aid asked by the 8th Army, draw attention of the enemy and to allow the Americans to recharge your spirits with a carefully prepared and victorious action.

On March 13, Alexander settled off the operation *WOP* (Italian immigrant) -between 15 and 17, that is given the proximity to the start of the offensive of Montgomery.

The American 2nd Corp was now made by the 1st Inf. Div. (Gen. Allen), the 9th Inf. Div. (Gen. Eddy), 34th Inf. Div. (Gen. Ryder), the 1st Arm. Div. (Gen. Ward), 13th Art. Bd. (Gen. Crane) and seven battalions of the 1st *Tank Destroyer Group*. Altogether, 88,000 men. However, a good part of them was bound by the Command of the Army Group to maintain their positions on the Grande Dorsale, with the 34th Inf. Div. in the sector of Sbiba and the 9th Inf. Div. in that of Kasserine. So that the availability to Patton was reduced to the 1st Inf. Div. and to the 1st Arm. Div., both profusely reinforced.

However, the presence of the Axis was evaluated as 7,100 men of the *Centauro* in Gafsa and 1,600 (half German) from Sened to Maknassy.

A violent rain, which turned the ground into a sea of mud difficult practicability, caused mishaps and delays. Finally, on March 16 the two divisions left the gathering area near the Grande Dorsale and tidied up to one and the other at Feriana in Kasserine. The 1st Inf. Div., from Feriana, had Gafsa as their direct objective, while *Combat Command A* of the 1st Arm. Div. would take the station of Zannouch ready to intervene and the bulk of the division would be ready control attacks originating from Sidi Bou Zid and the station of Sened.

At about 21:00 exploring elements probing here and there the situation around Gafsa, but welcomed by the fire of automatic weapons and Italian artillery, they retreated immediately. With the arrival of the columns of Gen. Allen was finally organized the attack. To be sure the enterprise will manifest easy because, realizing its imminence, Gen. Calvi at night did move back the few guns, leaving the *Lodi* on site with a few tanks and the German 580th Recon. Bn. with orders to avoid pinning. At the dawn of the 17th positions of the *Centauro* fell under the fire of a large artillery preparation before and after an air raid. But they were now abandoned: the remaining mobile units, saw the attack begin, withdrew over the El Guettar behind a screen of patrols of armored cars of the *Lodi* ⁽⁵⁰⁾.

Despite the clear Italian weakness, the 2nd Corp stopped preparing to support any counterattacks. Only the I *Ranger* battalion reached the 18th El Guettar, also evacuated. That evening a violent storm broke out that lasted for the next day, shook the area, filling the *wadis*, flooding positions and encampments, destroying sections of minefield and even causing human losses (the *Centauro* lost two officers and nine soldiers). It imposed a stop.

Let's return to the front of Mareth. Montgomery had decided to attack the evening of the 20th, with the full moon. But first it was necessary to complete the preliminaries, intended to get rid of the annoying advanced structure of the defense and, possibly, to mislead Messe on the sector concerned by the main effort. The night on the 16th local actions began and, we must say, with so much force as to indicate to the commander of the 1st Army came the long-awaited moment:

On March 16, beginning at 20:30 on the front of Mareth had a drumming of enemy artillery fire of extreme intensity. The characteristics of this action, very similar to the classic preparations of the enemy artillery, and especially to that of El Alamein, left no doubt about the enemy intentions of attacking thoroughly. The only element that could perplexing was the almost total absence of English aviation, that even in the days leading

had carried on the rear, the logistics centers, the airports, an activity much lower than expected ^{“(51)”}.

The advanced structure that the 50th Inf. Div. (Gen. Nichols) and the 51st Inf. Div. (Gen. Wimberley) were proposed to eliminate only the most advanced and the English were translated in the possibility to get closer to the Zigzagou *wadis* where it seemed less difficult to overcome. The 201st *Guards* Bd. but had a special task: to occupy the stronghold of Sidi el Guelaa, conventionally called the “horseshoe”, in the sector of the 90th Light to deceive the Italians on the gravitation of the effort.

The attack on the sector of the *Giovani Fascisti* met a frontal position different than elsewhere. Given the characteristics of the soil, was given greater depth to the position of resistance forming by two cornerstones to the right of the Zigzagou *wadis*, while the forward position had been reserved for the typical function of the safety zone. When, therefore, the 69th and the 153rd Inf. Bd. began to move, around 23:00, the contrast was that not to opposite to the bitter end: the three cornerstones of the company resisted up to the limit of the safe withdrawal by the position of strength. At the dawn of the 17th remained only a small platoon stronghold of the extreme Northeast.

The Brigade of *Guards* had the hardest mission. The restricted area of the 90th Light was heavily guarded with three battalions, instead of three companies, not charged to give security but to hold the position as long as possible to more advanced here than elsewhere, because the consequences of a rapid breakthrough would be serious. Hitting the I/361st Inf. and the. III/47th Inf. It was bloody for attackers and defenders.

The *Guards* were able to achieve significant penetration, but one counterattack launched at about 03:00 in the morning with the help of a battalion taken from the position of strength and the favor of a massive fire of the artillery was repulsed with heavy losses.

During the morning of the 17th Messe walked around and saw the commanders of the army corps and division; the speech was the same for everyone: do not give up. In particular, the *Giovani Fascisti*, who had lost the advanced band, had to push in front of the position of resistance patrols distinctly aggressive; the *Trieste* in connect with the left of the I/66th Inf. to the position of resistance with a undermined suspender; the 90th Light strengthen its stretch of the forward position. Unfortunately the limited stocks of ammunition became immediately feel; while strictly limiting the actions of fire, the army command was forced to request the delivery of ammunition for the 149 mm. by air.

In the night on the 18th the 50th and 51st Inf. Div. and the *Guards* repeated attacked. The 50th eliminated the last remaining element in the advanced area of the *Giovani Fascisti*. The 51st suffered a defeat against the I/66th Inf. of the *Trieste*, who captured fifteen prisoners. The *Guards* were immediately rejected with further heavy losses.

But about fifty kilometers south-west of Fom Tatahouine Montgomery saw with satisfaction started another preliminary action. In that area, the choice of the way where it would give too much in the eye to the Italian-German aerial reconnaissance, he had finished the meeting the complex forces called temporarily as the New Zealand Corp: New Zealand division, the 8th Arm. Bd., and various units. With the Leclerc column, who soon would reach the full extent of the troops placed under the command of Gen. Freyberg was about 27,000 men, 150 medium tanks, 110 field pieces and 170 Anti-tank. On the 18th the deployment of the 8th Army was virtually in place (see table of origination on next page).

The design of maneuver Montgomery had come more quickly refined, even on the basis of information provided by French officers aware of the defensive characteristics of the organization prepared at the time by France in that area. In essence, the commander of the 8th Army hoped to violently attack Italian positions with the 30th Corp, about 58,000 men, gravitating in an effort towards the sea, in the specific intention of attracting the rear of the army in this area; launched the New Zealanders, strongly reinforced, through Dahar to attack the threshold of El Hamma so as to break the rear of the bulk of the army; keep in reserve the 10th Corp (about 39,000 men) with two armored divisions, so that you can enter in the fighting on the line of attack at which the occurrence of the breakthrough; support the battle with a massive and focused intervention of aviation.

As for the possible German-Italian counter-attack, Montgomery did not hold excessive worries. From the interception of *Enigma* messages appeared clear that the British offensive was expected by the 1st Army, but the balance of power were too favorable to worry. There were uncertainties on the guidelines for use of German armored reserves, however, the calculations based on their consistency allowed soundly: in southern Tunisia the Axis could only play a defensive game ⁽⁵²⁾.

In the 1st Army Command the atmosphere was calm, while being aware of a tough commitment. At noon on the 18th von Arnim came to realize the situation. During the morning Messe was held meeting with the major subordinate commanders confirming the directive of maximum reactivity at all levels and by assigning the Grenadier Regiment of Africa, well equipped with anti-tank pieces, the *Giovani Fascisti*, the most sensitive sector. Welcomed therefore serenely an von Arnim doubtful that bending occur in the advanced position not justified by the danger of annihilation. On the one hand this attention was explained by the shallowness of the position of strength, the other was likely to change the meaning of the forward position. Messe pursue the matter:

Order of battle of the British 8th Army as of March 18, 1943	
Commander: Gen. Bernard L. Montgomery Chief of the G. S. Gen. Francis de Guinand	
10 th Corps (Gen. G. Brian Horrocks) with:	
1 st Arm. Div. (Gen. Raymond Briggs) with:	
2 nd Arm. Bd. (Gen. A.F. Fisher)	
7 th Mot. Bd. (Gen. T.J.B. Bosville)	
12 th Lancer with armored cars	
2 nd , 4 th and 11 th horse artillery	
76 th Anti-tank artillery	
42 nd anti-aircraft artillery	
smaller units	
7 th Arm. Div. (Gen. G. W. Erskine) with:	
22 nd Arm. Bd. (Gen. W.R.N. Hinde)	
131 st Mot. Bd. (Gen. L.G. Wistler)	
201 st <i>Guards</i> Bd. (Gen. J. A. Gascoigne)	
11 th Hussars with armored cars	
3 rd and 5 th horse artillery	
146 th artillery	
21 st and 65 th Anti-tank artillery	
15 th anti-aircraft artillery	
smaller units	
Troops of the Army Corps	
30 th Corps (Gen. Oliver Leese) with:	
50 th Inf. Div. (Gen. J.S. Nichols) with:	
69 th Inf. Bd. (Gen. E.C. Cooke-Collis)	
151 st Inf. Bd. (Gen. D.M. W. Beak)	
50 th <i>Royal Tank Regiment</i>	
65 th , 74 th and 125 th artillery	
102 nd Anti-tank artillery	
25 th anti-aircraft artillery	
smaller units	
51 st Inf Div. (Gen. Douglas Wimberley) with:	
152 nd Inf. Bd. (Gen. G. Murray)	
153 rd Inf. Bd. (Gen. D.A.H. Graham)	
154 th Inf. Bd. (Gen. J. E. Stirling)	

126th, 127th and 128th field artillery
 61st Anti-tank artillery
 40th Anti-Aircraft Artillery
 51st Recon regiment
 smaller units
 4th Indian Inf. Div. (Gen. Francis S. Tucker) with
 5th Indian Inf. Bd.
 7th Indian Inf. Bd.
 1st, 11th and 32nd field artillery
 149th Anti-tank artillery
 57th Anti-Aircraft Artillery
 smaller units
 Troops of the Army Corps

New Zealand Corp (Gen. Bernard Freyberg) with:
 2nd New Zealand Inf. Div. (Gen. Bernard Freyberg)

with:

5th Inf. Bd. (Gen. H. Kippenberger)
 6th Inf. Bd. (Gen. W. Gentry)
 4th, 5th and 6th Artillery
 7th Anti-tank artillery
 14th Anti-Aircraft Artillery
 2nd cavalry with light tanks
 smaller units

8th Arm. Bd. (Gen. C.B.C. Harvey)
 Column L. (Gen. Leclerc)
 1st *King Dragoon Guards* with armored cars
 111th field artillery
 64th heavy artillery
 57th Anti-tank artillery

Army troops

"In the same advanced line - he said - has already been made a distinction between the function of the advanced position in the areas of the GG.FF.* and *Trieste* and that of the advanced position in the sector of the 90th, *La Spezia* and *Pistoia*. The latter has greater value. The assessment comes from different soil conditions, the ability to strengthen the positions, the amplitude of the sectors.

At this time the advanced employment of the GG.FF. no longer exists. The *Trieste* is in all his positions with the exception of the left has withdrawn in line with the deployment of the GG.FF." ⁽⁵³⁾.

In von Arnim surfaced dissatisfaction with the conditions of the entire theater of operations. He resigned himself for the 21st *Panzer* to move further south, on the rear of the 15th, with the command of the DAK, noting bitterly that the 5th Army only possesses the Command: XXX Corp as demultiplier element (though not admitted that their command did not seem used to the best). He ventured the idea of doing the counter-battery with the aviation to save ammunition. The real and important change was provided by aerial observation: about fifty kilometers south of Ksar Rhilane had been spotted approximately 3,000 vehicles in motion. Unfortunately, the demands of an intervention by the aviation aimed at the disruption of the column fell virtually on deaf ears due to the unavailability of aircraft. On that day the Comando Supremo recommended economy in the use of air units!

On the 19th, the tension increased. The presence of French and New Zealander in Dahar, it was always guarded by the recon, despite the difficult conditions of the time, and fronted by German recon groups at a distance and by the *Nizza*. In the area of Gafsa it was recorded only the exchange of artillery fire, but evidently the Americans were preparing to press for pressure. Three things bothered Messe: the lack of artillery heavy field and heavy, the depletion of material strengthening and uncertainty about the aid of the armored reserves. At first, they made appeals to the Comando Supremo without much hope. For mines, barbed wire etc., More than an appeal it was a cry: "*Sending what is promised for the weekend was out of time: for then the battle may already be compromised.*" To the question of reserves, after the notorious meeting with von Arnim, Messe confirmed the decision to put up a resistance to the bitter end, however, he asked formally to

"Know as of now what assignment can be done on the aid of Army Group reserves and precise intentions same Command waves orientate promptly and timely prepare any behavior on the defensive battle (withdrawal into the Chotts line) should insist on the mentioned concept would expose the Army to the of danger annihilation" ⁽⁵⁴⁾.

Von Arnim replied immediately stating the guidelines for use of the reserve of the Army Group (the 21st *Panzer* in favor of the 1st Army and the 10th in favor of the 5th Army) and agreeing on an organized retreat on the line of Akarit if the situation had given the risk of the destruction of the army.

*GG.FF = *Giovani Fascisti*

Late in the evening *Ultra* made known by messages both to the Allied Commands⁽⁵⁴⁾. Montgomery then had no more illusions about the ability to hide the wide circle of New Zealanders - that, according to plan, that night would be centered in the Ksar Rhilane then spend an entire day of immobility - and decided to abandon all caution: at dawn Freyberg had to move north at maximum speed allowed by the means and by the ground.

So the 20th was characterized by the march of approach of the New Zealand Corps, mistakenly bombed by American aircraft and opposed by remnants of the Axis recon groups, often uncomfortable in front of the enemy armored vehicles (sketch n. 58). Around noon Bir Soltane was exceeded at 16:00 and stopped at the edge of Tamezred.

By now it was clear to be hours, and appeared equally clear the UK operating design: simultaneous attack in the coastal sector of Mareth and at El Hamma, limited pressure in the mountain sector of Mareth. The trouble was that the Saharan grouping, which the New Zealand Corps was directed against, appeared to be left to itself by force of circumstances. Only the day before it had received the only reinforcement that at the moment the commander of the army could give him: a battalion and a battery of 160. Now they could no longer wait passively. Assuming the imminent occurrence of an inevitable situation, Messe commanded the 164th Light to abandon the positions south of Cheguimi and occupy the mountains of Matmata between the *Pistoia* and the Sahara grouping. It was not an easy decision, because first both the Chief of Staff and the Chief of the operations office of the army showed themselves opposed, fearing that the waiver of the positions they controlled Ksar el Hallouf and Beni Kreddache would encourage the enemy to transfer the 4th Indian Inf. Div. from the area of Medenine to Dahar. Moreover, the impending danger on the right was real and serious. The adjustment was within the measures have already been studied and prepared, so that the movements were executed with rapidity. Just in time.

On March 20 was *D-day*. That morning, Montgomery turned a vibrant agenda to the troops that, given that "*the days of the Axis in North Africa are really numbered*" expounded his thoughts:

"3. In the battle that is about to begin, the 8th Army:

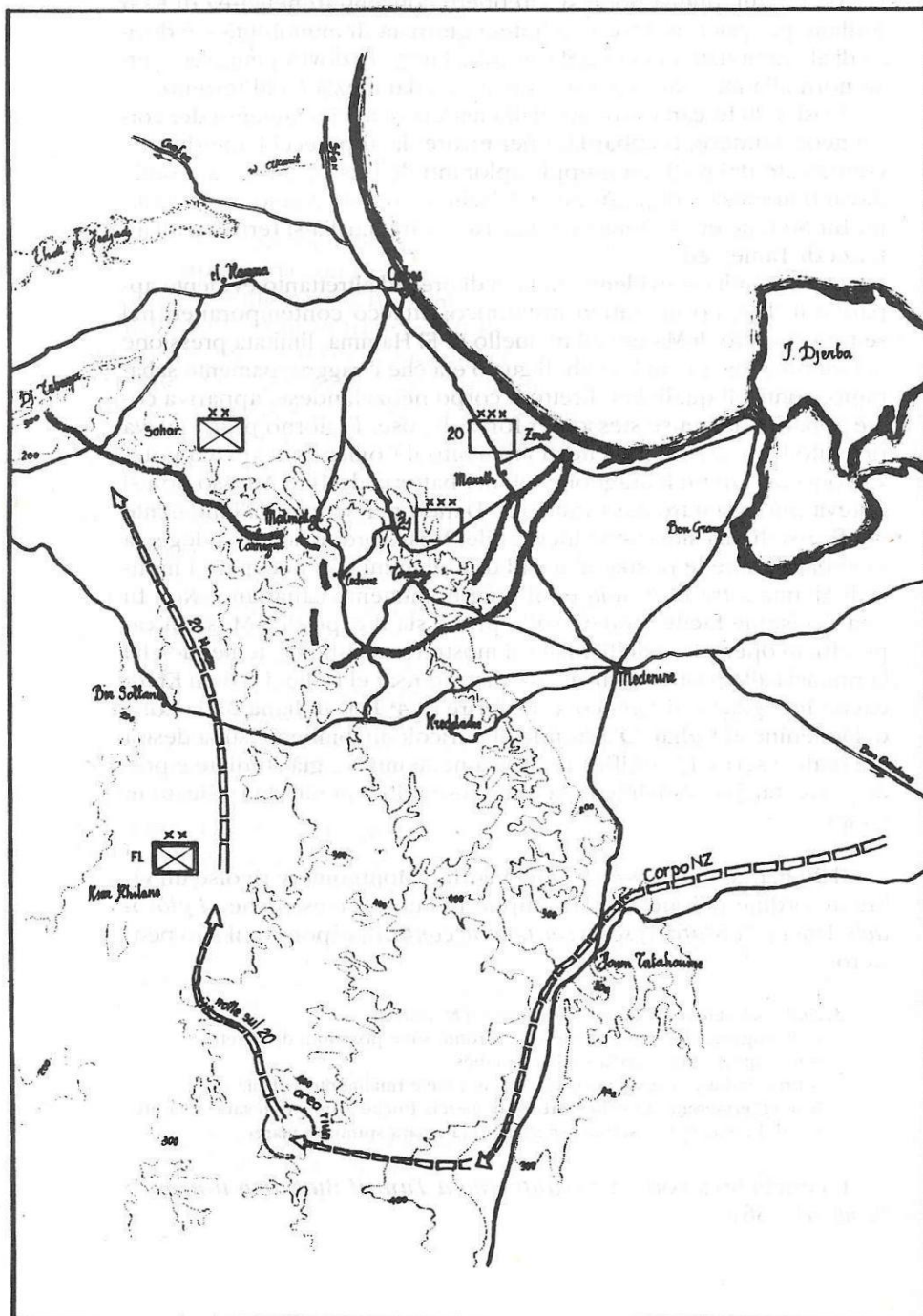
- will destroy the enemy that is in front of the positions of Mareth;
- will break through the threshold of Gabes;
- will continue then north of Sfax, Sousse and finally Tunis.

4. We will not stop or slow down the march until Tunis is taken, and the enemy abandon the fight or be pushed into the sea."

He concluded with a "*Next up in Tunis! We throw the enemy into the sea!*"⁽⁵⁶⁾.

The enveloping maneuver of the New Zealand Corps

LA MANOVRA AVVOLGENTE DEL CORPO NEOZELANDESE



The offensive of the British 30th Corp aimed at breaching the lower course of the Zigzagou *wadi* on a front of attack assigned to the 50th Inf. Div. of Gen. Nichols. The greatest burden was reserved for 151st Inf. Bd., reinforced by the 50th Tanks with 43 *Valentine* with the 2 pounder gun and 8 piece of 6 pounds, and supported by thirteen regiments from the field artillery and three of heavy field artillery (each piece possessed 500 shots). Each battalion was preceded by a platoon of sappers with *Scorpion* mine sweepers. The left flank of the brigade was covered by a battalion of the 69th Inf. Bd.

Further back, the 4th Indian Inf. Div. had to be ready to climb over the 50th and turn to the roadway for Gabes or if everything had taken place for the better, proceed directly to Gabes. As minimum task was the competition of the break through made by the 50th Division.

For the 51st *Highlanders* initially was expected to push through combat patrols. When the breakthrough had occurred, it would move at the turn of the road to Gabes. The 10th Corp finally was driven to build on the success immediately and as soon as where possible.

At 21:45 was the beginning stage of softening of static structures: half an hour of preparation by three regiments of the field artillery and three of medium; then a counter-battery now; finally, at 23:15, he began the fire support. At this point the 151st Inf. Bd. left the base.

21 March.

Towards 01:51 the positions held by the X and XI/8th Bersaglieri and the German Grenadiers of African were invested by the attacking wave. The two strong points manned by the Germans surrendered almost abruptly and now were occupied by the enemy. The breach was stormed by the British, extending it at the expense of the contiguous X/8th Bersaglieri, but the heavy losses suffered by the pioneers, the difficulties encountered in trying to overcome the bitter obstacle of the Zigzagou *wadi* ⁽⁵⁷⁾ and the approach of daylight They led Gen. Beak to temporarily waive the contribution of the 50th Tanks (just four *Valentine* had managed to pass the *wadis*) and to postpone the continuation of the effort until evening.

From 07:00 followed one another's reactions of sectoral reserves: the V/7th Bersaglieri and smaller units, effectively supported by artillery. Did not come to retake the fallen structures, but simply to give continuity to the static defense, thanks to the shift of the I/200th *Panzergranadiere* into the sector of the 90th Light (sketch n. 59).

All in all, despite the losses and patching of the front *Giovani Fascisti*, Gen. Orlando considered events with a certain optimism. A good account, Messe awarded him the *Luftwaffenjaegere* battalion brought to the west of Zarat the 15th *Panzer*. He too did not feel very concerned about the pace of the fight against the extreme left of the army; far more dangerous was what was being outlined

Schizzo n. 59

(21-22 marzo)

D. "Giovani Fascisti"

Zarat

Marelli

Mestana

Nardi

151 UK

50 UK

69 UK

153 UK

152 UK

21-22 marzo

on the far right, at the threshold of El Hamma, where everything seemed to have anticipated the attack thoroughly.

The Saharan grouping clearly could not bear the brunt alone. With a slender deployment cordon, with units poorly armed, in part picked up here and there, partly just landed from Italy with no experience, with few and outdated artillery, with paltry means of connection, it could accomplish a task worth to bad coverage, as Messe had reported to the Command of the Army Group. He aggravated this state of fact the presence of workers intermingled to the units to need to work.

Taking advantage of a visit of Gen. Gause with Gen. Hildebrandt, Messe asked so that the 21st *Panzer* was moved to behind the grouping Saharan and placed immediately subordinate to the command of the army. Gause promised to report to von Arnim, but just left, Gen. Bayerlein warned that as a result of direct agreements with Hildebrandt, the 21st *Panzer* became immediately available. The Luck grouping had to pass for the time being under the orders of Gen. Mannerini, then of Hildebrandt just arrived in the area.

The last action taken concerned the army reserve. Now all the initial resources were mortgaged in favor of the sectors under threat; moreover it could not conduct a battle without taking something in hand. Because the mountain section appeared blatantly ignored by the enemy, Messe ordered Gen. Berardi to extend towards the west area of the *Pistoia*, easing its deployment position of resistance and occupying battalion blocks of the key position of Kef el Boum (west of Cheguimi) and road junctions of Techine and Matmata. It followed a few changes to the limit of the area of the *La Spezia*, but also the recovery of the 164th Light, to move back into a central location.

At 11:30 Montgomery told Alexander that the Corps of New Zealand was about 25 kilometers south-west of El Hamma and marching on ... Gabes. His idea was precisely that Freyberg, after breaching the line of the Sahara group, would turn to the south taking from behind the XX and XXI Corp and helping Leese. But since I anticipated "*hard fighting that can last several days*" would be desirable to have a strong American armored push over Maknassy to block the Sfax-Gabes road ⁽⁵⁸⁾.

Indeed, the Gen. Patton was angling to. He was notoriously exuberant and confident character. In addition, he had assimilated in full the personal instructions of Eisenhower about his specific American task: immediately rehabilitate the troops of the 2nd Corp. Among other things, the commander in chief had told him: "*You must not keep for a moment more in a position of responsibility anyone who arouse your doubts about his ability to perform the job. This weight requires more courage than any other decision, but I expect*

you do it with the utmost coldness ... I will give you the best possible substitutes will confirm or want to adopt any solution" ⁽⁵⁹⁾.

Endured with the brief stagnation imposed by the bad weather, the appearance of signs of improvement Patton had immediately ordered the 1st Arm. Div. and the 1st Inf. Div. to attack. Gen. Ward had to point in the direction of Maknassy the day of the 20th. Gen. Allen was up, however, forcing the pass of El Guettar starting the action the same evening. These directives, as is natural considering the balance of power local, imprinted the events a rate not at all promising for the Axis and showed the difficulties caused by poor distribution of operational responsibilities.

The sector of Maknassy was held by a part of the 50th Special Brigade, one of Gafsa by the *Centauro*. It was, that is, the internal wings of the two armies, each of which inevitably affected by adverse developments in the field of fighting the other: an issue already raised by Messe, but ignored by von Arnim. Now he is approaching the *redde rationem** (sketch n. 60).

Attack of *Combat Commands A and B* of the 60th *Regimental Combat Team* of the 1st Arm. Div. overthrew the weak resistance of the station Sened: The II/92nd Inf., the VI group of *Aosta* on foot, and three batteries. Gen. Imperiali had come immediately, but having seen the impossibility of containing somehow the American drive. Left each other, therefore be in contact with two Germans recon groups (the *Kasta OB* and 580th, just supplied to him by the *Centauro*) was returned to Maknassy placed on trial in a rush defense in the hills east of the town with what he had in place: little more than one company Border Guard Machine gunners, a company of engineers and three 105 pieces.

On the evening of the 20th Gen. Allen had moved the trying to pave the way for Mahares and Gabes and the strong pressure on the middle section of the sector, after the rapid elimination of the target point just east of El Guettar, had achieved some results. The resumption of the efforts of the two divisions during the day of the 21st, immediately showed uneven. Allen insisted: in the morning the right flank of the *Centauro* on Djebel Orbata was pushed back by the American 26th infantry, forcing the defense to deflect the line and to look for a connection to Sened. Instead, further north, as goaded by Patton, Ward moved with caution. Only after the recon informed him, at 07:15, the abandonment of Maknassy by the enemy - which, according to the few inhabitants, had settled on the hills to the east of the country - *Combat Command C* and *Combat Command B*, which was taken from the north, headed on target. The 60th *Combat Team*, exhausted, had been at the Sened station and *Combat Command A* was coming there. Ward preferred not to risk it and postpone the conquest of hilly positions an action well prepared.

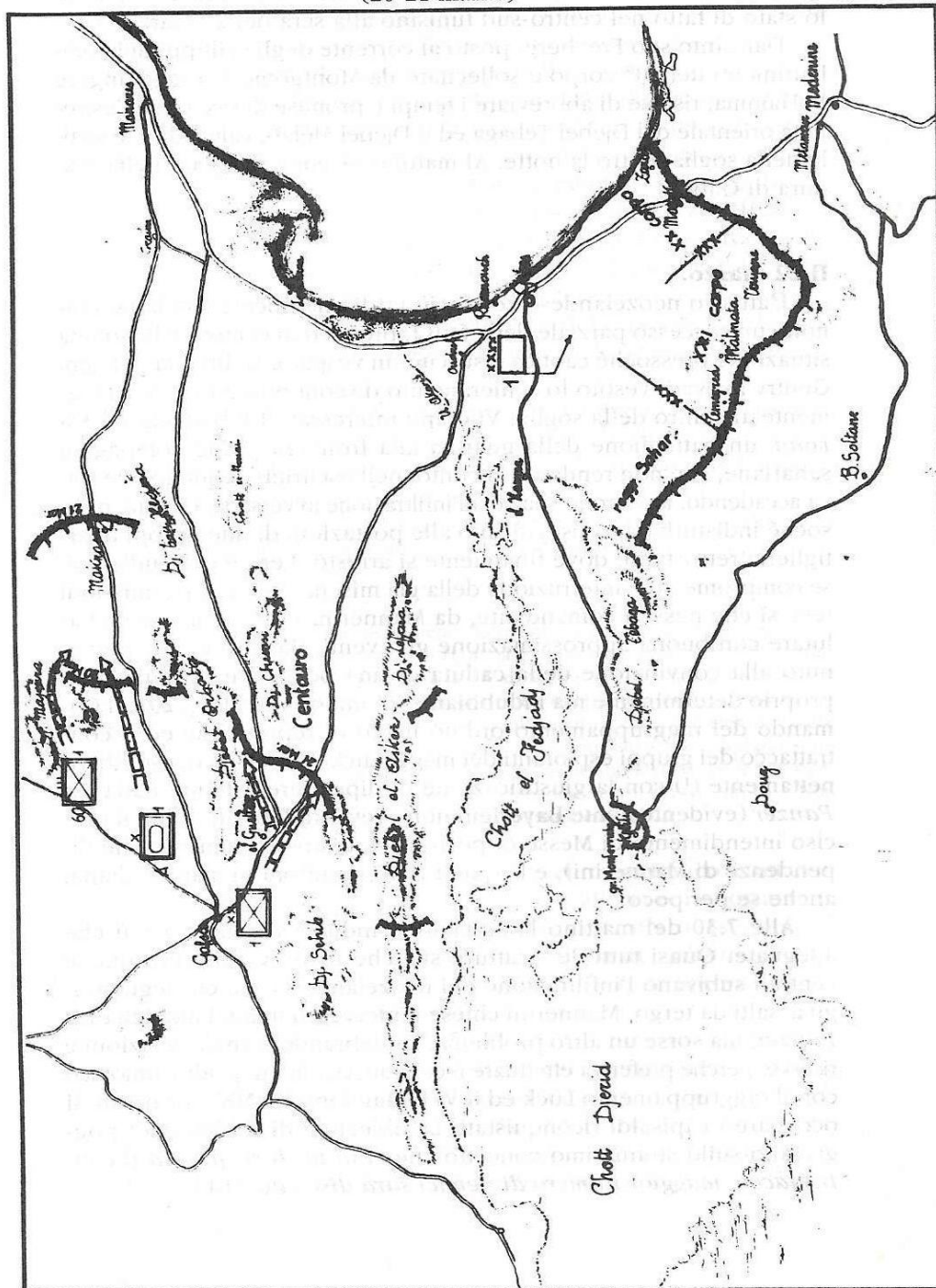
I saw how they put things, initially von Arnim ordered the intervention of the 10th *Panzer* on Maknassy; then, at 15:00,

Latin = *to give an account*. or here a showdown

The American attack in the areas of El Guettar and Maknassy (20-21 March)

Schizzo n. 60

L'ATTACCO DEL 2° CORPO AMERICANO NEI SETTORI DI
EL GUETTAR E DI MAKNASSY
(20-21 marzo)



he changed decision. The division had to go to El Guettar and Gen. Imperiali getting by with the two Germans Recon Bn.⁽⁶⁰⁾. Therefore he entrusted to Gen. Cramer, commander of the DAK, the responsibility for the entire collapsing sector defense, taking his orders to the *Centauro* and restoring the situation with the 10th *Panzer*. This state of fact in the central-southern Tunisia in the evening of 21 March.

For his part Freyberg, on the current developments of the fighting and urged 30th Corp by Montgomery to reach El Hamma, resolved to reduce the time and promised to occupy the eastern end of the Djebel Tebaga and Djebel Melab, namely behind the threshold, by night. In the morning it would disgorged in the plain of Gabes.

22 March.

The New Zealander attack began late, but shortly after midnight a partial success of the 6th Inf. Bd. He resulted in an almost chaotic situation in the Italian sector and stirred a hornet's nest. The brigade of Gen. Gentry had invested the discontinuous linear deployment and exactly in the center of the threshold. They were interested in the V *Savona* Battalion, a battalion of the border guard and two safari companies, not realizing in the darkness of what was happening, gave way to enemy infiltration. This, almost undisturbed, went up to the positions of the two groups of artillery behind, where it was finally stopped. As nothing was compromised, the interruption of the already poor network of broadcasting meant that no commander, from Mannerini down, could assess with good approximation events. Suffice it to say that, come to the conclusion of the fall of a central location, not just crucial but undoubtedly important, hill 201, the command of the group ordered the shooting of repression and counter attack by the recon groups of the Major. Luck. Except that these flatly refused (!) With the justification to depend only on the 21st *Panzer* (evidently Bayerlein had not translated into orders the precise intention of Messe put Luck temporarily in the employ of Mannerini), and hill 201 was still in Italian hands, although nearly.

At 07:30 am, the situation induced measures more than adequate. Almost all facilities were resisting, but the central ones suffered infiltration of New Zealanders and, consequently, the assaults from behind. Mannerini demanded the immediate intervention of the 21st *Panzer*, but another problem arose. Hildebrandt stepped hesitations and reservations, preferring to make the counter in a harmonious picture with the Luck group and the VI CC.NN. Battalion, in charge of occupying the reconquered cornerstones. Hildebrandt's objections were based on the strange notion that "*Later we will launch a counterattack, many enemies will be destroyed*"⁽⁶¹⁾.

The action was therefore not performed before 10:30: too late, as the New Zealanders had already consolidated the success protecting themselves with numerous anti-tank guns.

In the early hours of the night, during the attack by Freyberg, the Gen. Nichols had resumed his efforts to get at least one passage the Zigzagou *wadi* on the three previewed. During the next night his division would be passed through by the 4th Indian.

In fact, the purpose was achieved and the 50th *Tanks* was able to move beyond the obstacle. Unfortunately the damage to the banks of the *wadis* were such that no other means or anti-tank gun could pass and, to make matters worse, a violent downpour greatly increased the level and value of a preventative nature of the stream. At the end of the morning Nichols was in serious embarrassment. There was now a bridgehead over the Zigzagou, it is true, but it was fragile, the troops tired, insecure connections, sensitive confusion. He did not suspect that the *Giovani Fascisti* feared the worst seeing the enemy in contact with the rear edge position of strength in the coastal sector and ignoring the difficulties of feeding the effort.

Messe judged opportune time for the counterattack. Shortly before noon, the 15th *Panzer* departed the base; at 12:45 began the artillery preparation and three quarters of an hour later the Gen. Borowietz attacked.

While the 15th *Panzer* came out of the palms of Zarat prepare for battle, Montgomery was sending a satisfied message to Alexander:

"My actions are going well. On the left the Corp of New Zealand is located about ten miles southwest of El Hamma and moves along the road that relies in this location (...). On the right the 50th Division has secured a bridgehead across all the strong points of the Mareth position to the east and southeast of Zarat; this bridgehead is being extended and it will start other actions. The enemy vigorously resists and operations in the sector of Zarat are very similar to those of El Alamein (...). I suggest that you announce that my operations are progressing satisfactorily and according to plan (...), not even mentioned the Zealand Corps movements" (62).

The 15th *Panzer* went to the base of the salient British at full speed, supported by a powerful artillery fire and, despite the English resistance, dusk the beachhead was almost completely eliminated. The 8th Arm. Bd. lost thirty *Valentine*, the 15th *Panzer* had only three tanks damaged. There was no denying the image of a struggle to for nothing from the British side.

At this point, the 1st Army breathed in the sector of Zarat but panting in that of El Hamma. Early deployment to the threshold of the same name even remained a solid right flank, with the I/36th Inf. of the *Pistoia* settling quickly on the slopes of Djebel Tebaga; a shaky left shoulder with the battalion of the border guard already collapsing and a company Saharan clinging to Djebel

Melab; a kind of containment line between the two flanks, with the 21st *Panzer* (who had lost half his tanks), the remnants of the Luck recon group and VI CC.NN. battalion placed in a arch strongly fixed. Instead, the left wing of Saharan grouping at Tamezred until, that is, the stretch entrusted to 350th Inf., was intact.

It seems very likely that a majority decision by the enemy would have caused a serious crisis for the 1st Army. Freyberg but did not accept the suggestion of Gen. Gentry and Harvey to launch the 8th Arm. Bd. beyond the 6th Inf. Bd. Probably he was influenced by several considerations: he had a clear picture of the progress of 30th Corp (on which progress was skeptical at the start); even with the additions received, he still lacked an eighth of the organic force and further losses might have led to the withdrawal of part of the New Zealand from the theater of operations. Ultimately, it is likely he had the impression "*that were asked to move alone and to bear all the interventions of the reserves and armored infantry*"⁽⁶³⁾.

We see now the measures taken in the evening by the opposing commanders.

Messe commanded the 164th Light to move in line on the threshold of El Hamma and decided reshaping defensive buoyancy. Mannerini with his command had to move to El Hamma provide for the logistics supply of the few Italian units remained in place; Gen. von Liebenstein took command of the entire line from Tebaga to Djebel Melab and released the mobile units to obtain them with the termination of the salient created by New Zealand at the threshold; the subsector of the 350th Inf. was transferred to the employ of XXI Corp.

Gen. Leese, however, would insist on saying "*essential for the continuation of operations expand our current beachhead to allow ready passage of Zigzagou wadi*"⁽⁶⁴⁾. According to the orders given by him at 21:15, the 50th Inf. Div. that night was to try again with the 69th Inf. Bd., reinforced by two pioneers companies of the 4th Indian Inf. Div. and 5th *Tanks* with *Grant* and *Sherman*.

23 March.

As unwillingly, the 8th Army Command had to admit that the operation *Pugilist*, at least in the initial setting, had failed. At about 02:00 Leese went to Montgomery. He was very upset, very upset with the outcome of the attack of the 50th Inf. Div. negative again: "*No matter - said -here we took them, but you need to keep engaged the German reserves on the entire front of the army corp.*"⁽⁶⁵⁾. The fiasco in the sector of Zarat was unmistakable-and, moreover, he did not know the destination of the 15th *Panzer*, now retired after conclusion of the victorious counter-attack but on the side of El Hamma the game hung in the balance. He had to change the plan.

I realized - Montgomery admitted - that persist in the attacks along the coast would have cost us very dear, and therefore decided to terminate the episode of the 50th Division and to throw everything I had in outflanking movement; I thought of the decisive blow on the El Hamma-Gabes axle before Rommel had been able to transfer his reserves to oppose my move. I now tried to pin the Germans in the coastal sector, giving them the impression that I was reorganizing the strength to repeat the attack (...) ⁽⁶⁶⁾.

Among other things, knowing the order to recover the 164th Light given by Messe, there was the hope of opening a way of penetration through the mountains of Matmata. On this basis the 8th Army Command issued the implementing orders for *Supercharge* ⁽⁶⁷⁾. In summary, in the night on the 24th 30th Corps had to give up the bridgehead on the Zigzagou wadis; Commanded 10th Corp with the 1st Arm. Div. started the movement to join with the New Zealanders, following the same route along; 4th Indian Inf. Div. would move on Ksar el Hallouf to open the road to Matmata. On the latter point, the design was still a little hazy. Apart from the convenience of using the entrenchment Medenine- Ksar el Hallouf -Bir Soltane for moving units and for supplies, if the Indians were established in the area Toujane-Matmata, the 7th Arm. Div. could circumvent at a narrow radius position of Mareth. The whole point of the maneuver was to keep pressure on the two Italian Corps and, with them, the German armored reserves (at least the 15th Panzer) for thirty six hours the time it takes to bring the 1st Arm. Div. Reinforcement in the New Zealanders and to throw the *left hook*. At worst, if that is where the 15th Panzer had instead shifted to the northwest, the 30th Corps would renew his effort.

Freyberg was concerned about the contradictory reports communicated to him by the 8th Army about the movements of the 10th Panzer, however at 04:30 received a communication from Montgomery with the news of the imminent arrival of the 1st Arm. Div. and an indication of the likely constraints of the German divisions: the 15th Panzer was blocked in Mareth, the 10th Panzer in Gafsa, the 164th Light was still on the mountains of Matmata. So before New Zealand could be the 21st Panzer (and perhaps an part of this was heading towards Gafsa) and part of the 164th Light. In essence, with the 1st Arm. Div. available the Gabes goal became not difficult.

Instead, as we know, was the entire 164th Light, already detached from the static defense, to stand at the threshold barrier of El Hamma. True it is that von Liebenstein, soon took command and including the situation, asked for reinforcements.

Messe well realize the plausibility of the request, but he also knew that he had already thinned dangerously the positions of the XXI Corps. He took one last measure: Berardi ordered to lighten the area of the *La Spezia*, recovering the 125th Infantry (with two battalions) and bringing it to about thirty kilometers from the position of strength,

as a (motorized) army reserve. While approving the measure, von Arnim was not satisfied with the location and said the regiment to deploy halfway between Mareth and Gabes, at the bottom of the Zigzagou *wadi*, where the enemy had until then tried to break through, but Messe planted his feet. He explained that those two battalions representing the last troops that could take away from the strongholds and that much more important the defensive depth in the coastal strip was promptly run for cover in El Hamma, where the situation at the moment under control, could turn to a sudden collapse. Incidentally, in the morning the Djebel Melab held by elements of the group Sahara, had been occupied by Force L of Gen. Leclerc.

Overall, on 23 March marked a general stagnation, in which both antagonists prepared the next move. The busiest were the Commands of the 8th Army, of the 30th Corp (from which depended the 4th Indian), and of the 10th Corp (from which depended the 1st Armored). At 18:00, the 4th Indian marched. As a first goal was winning the pass of Ksar el Hallouf, already abandoned by the 164th Light; then he had to get around from the west Toujane. The short study by Gen. Tucker had highlighted major difficulties, however, had constituted a clear need for a rapid movement, so as to fill up by night. The division was based on three pillars: the 7th Brigade directed to pass of Kreddache to turn the target from the south, the 5th directed on Ksar el Hallouf and a third column (a battalion of *Rajiputana*) on the right, to distract the attention of the defense.

Clearly something did not work out. When the 5th Indian Brigade moved, to his astonishment he found himself blocked by the 1st Arm. Div. that was going on the only road available, absolutely unaware of the simultaneous movement of the other big units. The result was a delay of twelve hours of grave importance for the 4th Indian Division because it affected his resulting maneuver.

24 March.

The operations of the 24th marked a setback over the front of the 1st Army. Some landmark in the sector of the *Giovani Fascisti* were retaken; XX Corp signaled the impression of an easing of the British presence; the XXI warned that a strong wheeled vehicle traffic and armored and artillery was occurring from Medenine southbound; aerial reconnaissance confirmed the news of convoys to the south-west and parked vehicles at Bir Soltane.

The commander of the army realized the transfer of forces to the west and the massive effort that would soon be made against the threshold of El Hamma. And he knew that von Liebenstein was in unstable equilibrium. In the afternoon he presented to von Arnim, who accompanied

by Gen. Gause. Was pleased to sincerely as the offensive had been stopped and for the prompt recovery of units from the line and intervention of reserves. But ... it was worried by the delicate situation of Maknassy-El Guettar. In his view, von Liebenstein with the 21st *Panzer* "*will hold for today*", but without it how long it would last? In other words, if you really were needed of the 21st *Panzer* at Maknassy, for how many days the front of El Hamma would hold? "Not even 24 hours - said Messe - to be optimistic." "*Then* - said von Arnim - *to constitute a reserve there is that to come in the determination of fall back on the shorter line of Chotts*".

The question was anything but simple. It was necessary to hide from the enemy plans to retire, ensure the ownership threshold of El Hamma to make possible the recovery of the XX and XXI Corp, release troops from the Mareth position without offering the right to an easy breakthrough, run the retrograde movement in echelons making the most of the limited available trucks. But we must point out that for several days the area south of Akarit was greatly relieved. The structures of territorial character, the organs of the Intendenza is not indispensable, the elements behind the lines not related to the needs of the battle had been evicted or at least greatly reduced weight. In anticipation of an unfavorable turn of events, Messe had tried to avoid damaging overloads.

After a quick review of the general outline of the operation, von Arnim formally ended up giving the order to "*begin the withdrawal from the positions of Mareth to the positions of Gabes*". Messe thought to start the next night, that dusk of the 25th(68).

The occasion allowed a very firm stance against the Army Group Command. He was ungenerous between the two commands a certain voltage caused primarily - as Messe will write later in his report - a clear animus of Gen. Gause against the Italians. In the German evening news of the 21st, about the struggle faced by the *Giovani Fascisti* read: "*Another cornerstone was apparently abandoned at approximately 17:00 without a fight. You must determine whether the strong point has fallen as a result of combat or if surrendered*". Apart from the inaccuracy of the news, he caught the eye for the immediate reporting of a negative episode before establish its credibility, but also the comparison with the almost sudden silence on the collapse of the four companies of the *Panzergrenadiere Afrika* regiment. And in the situation report of Army Group on the 22nd read: "*In the sector of the Mannerini division the enemy after the surrender of five Italian companies on both sides broke through the Jebel Melah [= Djebel Melab]. It is underway the counter attack of the 21st Armored Division (...). In the area of the Giovani Fascisti Division (...) has been lost another Italian stronghold. The point of breakthrough was blocked by German troops. The 15th Armored Division*

is now aligning to a counter attack". Both episodes themselves will elicit oversized, even if substantially true, but their presentation - without any care of preventive control and only intended to put in all evidence as the boat would hold afloat only thanks to ability of German troops - was malicious and could not but arouse obvious psychological reactions contrasting between the two Axis partners ⁽⁶⁹⁾.

The protest of Messe -who remembered without further ado that the Germans encountering in similar weaknesses, without ever Command of the Army Group will give the effort to detect it, and took the ball to complain about the lack of enthusiasm shown by Gen. Hildebrandt - was immediately picked up by von Arnim, who showed himself embarrassed and sorrowful and formulated the broader apology, naturally imitated by Gause.

Shortly after noon Freyberg received from Montgomery's order to breakthrough the next day, after a powerful air strike, and to launch immediately into the breach armored units. Almost simultaneously reached Gen. Horrocks. Montgomery was very rich feel is perhaps too much to state. Of course, in this case, he had committed a psychological blunder, bumping the sensitivity of Freyberg and embarrassing Horrocks:

“(...) You and he will be working together - had written the first - and you should achieve decisive results. Horrocks and reconnaissance units should be with you about 12:00 hours. The 10th Corps will take over when the 1st armored division will come, probably in the afternoon of 25 March.”

But Freyberg, the senior in *age* and rank to Horrocks, "*was determined to prevent any newcomer should interfere in the use of the New Zealand 2nd division and was cold, determined and not at all willing to work*" ⁽⁷⁰⁾. Horrocks, meanwhile, had already strong irritated for the long march and unexpected transfer taxed his armor without the slightest warning, however, was careful not to claim the leadership of combat without official investiture (which was not).

The two commanders read and discussed the project of their superior. The characteristics of the threshold of El Hamma, insufficiently large to maneuver with armored vehicles, allowed three options: force close with a systematic action, which would translate into a commitment that could last for a week; frontal attack with the New Zealanders and the flanks of the Djebel Tebaga with the 1st Arm. Div., which could begin in the evening on the 28th; launched the 8th Armored Brigade to head down with the support of all the fire available, aircraft and artillery, which would lead almost certainly slaughter of the same brigade. The response, sent "*by General Freyberg and Horrocks,*" recommended the second option, which - unless a particular tactical unexplained - separated the two efforts instead combine them.

Montgomery said in the late afternoon, preferring a systematic

but so it focused, prepared and supported by the fire turn into a German Blitz type breakthrough. Also he added to be oriented to two other lightening attacks: the 7th Arm. Div. on the front of Mareth and the 4th Indian Inf. Div. to Toujane. While leaving the decision to "My dear general", advanced the hope that the *D-day* was the following day on March 25, so the 1st Arm. Div. It would be ready to build on the success of the 26th.

Montgomery had not made lightly the prospect of a massive fire. Studied the possibility of a part of around its left wing the Djebel Tebaga, through Kebili, he had discarded because of the isolation which required the column operate north of Djebel. It was necessary to find something else. He began to reflect on the undoubted Allied air domain: why would not have been able to shut down all obstacles to promote the affirmation of the superiority of the British tanks? His Chief of Staff, de Guingand, spoke to Gen. Broadhurst, commander of the *Western Desert Air Force*, and they ended up nodding: "*I will do it; have all drop fire: bombs and cannons. It will be really a blitz at low altitude and I'll explain it to stress to all the pilots*" ⁽⁷¹⁾.

The result was that was planned using 40 light bombers on the narrow front break immediately before the attack. Then, under the protection of five *squadrons* of *Spitfires*, 16 *squadrons* of *Kittyhawk* had to act for two and a half hours on the battlefield, ensuring the uninterrupted presence of two *squadrons* and using guns and bombs against any target. In addition, a *squadron* of tank-busters especially trained would intervene against any concentration of German tanks.

By way of preliminary, during the previous two nights the *D-day* bombers would spread disorder in the rear of the 1st Army. What action the on the ground - that was to begin in mid-afternoon, so you have the sun behind - after the air strikes would begin a artillery barrage behind which would have started the tanks and then the infantry.

Freyberg and Horrocks considered the various aspects of the framework outlined by Montgomery and at 20:00 declared themselves ready to put in motion *Supercharge*, though moving *D-day* to the 26th to prevent the 1st Arm. Div. arriving scattered by a frantic march transfer, albeit on a tank, and that the artillery reinforcement is deployed without a minimum of guidance.

25 March.

As declared himself ready to begin the withdraw to Chotts night on the 26th, Messe soon realized that he could not recover so quickly trucks required for the task, because the two days before the Allied fighter-bombers had inflicted serious damage on convoys in circulation, especially to those of the 164th Light.

Asking therefore a shift of twenty-four hours, reserving the night on the 26th for the withdraw of the heavy artillery, departmental personnel and ammunition depots.

However, on the morning of the 25th would reconsider the situation. During the night a local action of a unit of the 51st *Highlanders*, arrived to overwhelm a cornerstone of *Trieste*, had ended in failure due to a quick response that re-established the *status quo*. The *Pistoia*, as expanded on a broad front, it seemed to run immediate risks. Even in El Hamma it was found a stasis. Knowing that this temporary period of relative quiet in the act of transfer depended on the British units westward, Messe thought achievable steering in the opposite: bring more forces to the Liebenstein area and attack the opponent while he was still staggered in depth. Its impact could be made by the 15th and 21st *Panzer* and the 90th Light removed from the line of Mareth; the static front was manned by the 164th Light, by the 125th Infantry *Spezia* and the remains of the Saharan grouping.

Also Kesselring, who arrived on a visit in the previous afternoon, had declared prone to a more pronounced use of dynamic reactions rather than the abandonment of the position. But Kesselring, really, seemed to oscillate between two attitudes: one critical of Rommel and von Arnim, and trust in their own setting another. In his memoirs, it reads:

"(...) It was not possible to hold the positions of Mareth the threatened circumvention of the south, through the desert, because of the delay in arranging appropriate movement of ground forces by the aviation. It is not believed possible major troop movements across the desert, whereas the Kiwis then accomplished the march starting from Fom Tatahouine, what I had expected after reconnaissance flights carried out" ⁽⁷²⁾.

And about what was events north of Chotts:

"During the struggle that took place with ups and downs on the ground between Maknassy, Gafsa and El Guettar they occurred very critical phases, which required my personal intervention on the site and were overcome with sometimes improvised actions" ⁽⁷³⁾.

He was referring to the 10th *Panzer* that, at his suggestion to von Arnim, had to break through in Gafsa and then turn to the flank of American troops committed to Maknassy. "*He spoke with evident satisfaction*" at Messe, which, little convinced, merely a comment "*It seems to me outside of reality*" ⁽⁷⁴⁾.

Certainly the events in that area were such as worry and very. At the proposal of Messe to fight the New Zealanders with a strong German mechanized mass under the guidance of Gen. Cramer; von Arnim replied immediately:

-Afterward the situation developing at Maknassy is predictable that the first significant armed forces will soon be sent there. Please therefore give

implementing measures agreed on at last March 24. It is essential movements in the Mareth area are covered by front Liebenstein. If after repelling an enemy attack will manifest there the possibility of local pushes, their action can be exploited. DAK command for now can not be put at your disposal" ⁽⁷⁵⁾.

Determined as the function of the sector Liebenstein, protection of the exposed flanks to the bulk until extraction beyond the pass of Gabes, that night was the principle withdraw. And that evening began operation *Supercharge II*.

On the British side they were completing preparations, leaving to the aviation treatment of rage over the entire area of the battle and, in particular, on that of El Hamma. The *Wellington* 205th Group of the *Royal Air Force* and the bombers of the *Western Desert Air Force* began the night on 25 to hit anything in order to destroy vehicles, disrupt the telephone network and to deprive the enemy of sleep and rest. During the day they were followed daytime bomber raids on the landing strips in the area next to the Djebel Tebaga and tank-busters on German tanks with some success (but *Hurricane* paying with six out of ten).

And *Ultra* he continued, tireless, its precious work of decryption. Allied Commands knew now the heavy wear and tear suffered by the 10th Panzer counterattack at El Guettar against Americans. They knew the order given to the 21st Panzer and the 164th Light to react only to face a new attempt by the New Zealander, and even the doubts of the Axis could keep "the new position of resistance [=at El Hamma] so" *poorly supervised* ". And on March 25 joined other consoling elements from a communication von Liebenstein: the 21st Panzer was not able to recover the share lost, a massive effort of British tanks could not be dismissed and were pressing reinforcements. In the evening, then, von Liebenstein warned that before too much pressure there was a risk that had to fall back on El Hamma and beyond ⁽⁷⁶⁾. It was enough to reassure Freyberg and Horrocks.

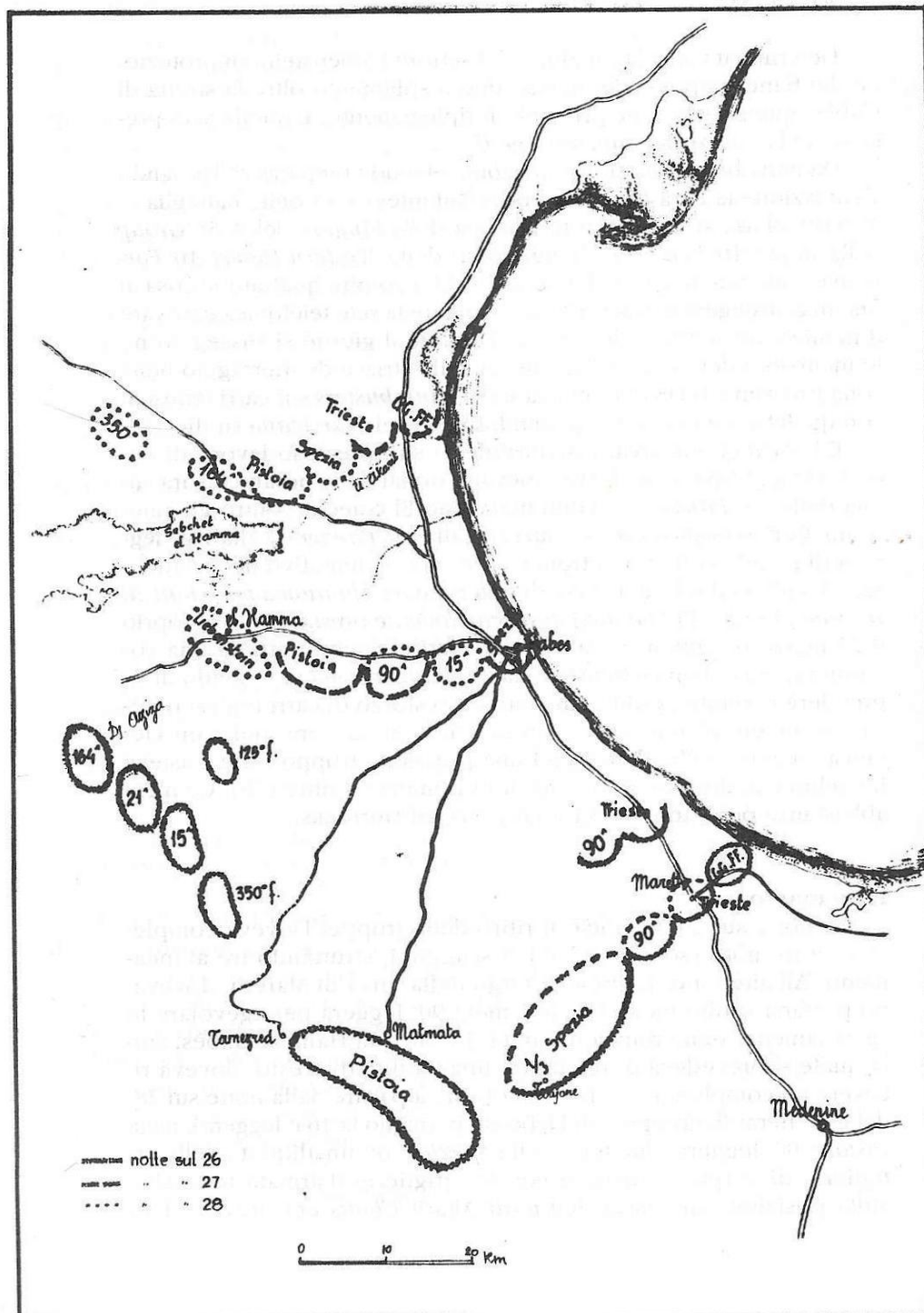
March 26.

The night on the 26th began the withdrawal of troops. He had to be completed in three nights (sketch No. 61), in installments, using the three alignments. At the height of Zerkine, on the rear of the Mareth line, they had to take immediately half Trieste and half 90th Light to facilitate the release of the remaining units. The El Hamma - Gabes line, on which it was intended to achieve a halt, was to receive a group of forces under the command, from the night on the 28th of Gen. Berardi: the von Liebenstein Group (minus the 164th Light), half of the *Pistoia*, the 90th Light, two-thirds of the *La Spezia*, with a part of the corps artillery and the artillery of the German army. On the defensive position of the Akarit-Chotts *wadi* was expected inflows

The foreseen phases for the withdraw of 1st Army

Schizzo n. 61

FASE PREVISTE PER IL RIPIEGAMENTO DELLA 1^a ARMATA



of the *Giovani Fascisti*, of the *Trieste*, a third of the *La Spezia*, half of the *Pistoia*, the 164th Light and 350th Infantry with the rest of the artillery under the command of Gen. Orlando. The whole employing three times the same trucks in a shuttling between the various lines. The resumption of the British offensive air raids and the wear of the media will ensure that while the XX Corp will fall back in order and substantially undisturbed, the XXI and the troops will have to leave the von Liebenstein sector various elements on the battlefield and on the way .

The preamble to *Supercharge II* came at 03:00 am, when the New Zealand 21st Battalion occupied hill 184, an advanced position useful as an observation post, held by elements of the 104th *Panzergrenadiere* (sketch n. 62).

The final plan was based on the following sequence of times. 15:30 Action at low altitude of sixteen *squadrons* of fighter-bombers of the *Western Desert Air Force*; 16:00 to the beginning of the preparation of artillery by two field regiments and a heavy field; advanced contemporary the 8th Armored Brigade with three regiments in line; at 16:15 overcoming the starting line by two New Zealand brigades; at 18:15 bypassing of New Zealanders by the 1st Armored Division; 23.30 about continuation of the 1st Armored Division on El Hamma ⁽⁷⁷⁾.

During the entire course of the attack the bombers had to fly in front of the infantry and continuity over the enemy, first bombing and then strafing at flying low. The *Spitfire* protected the aircraft from Italian-German air raids. For added safety the rest of the *Northwest African Tactical Air Force* would be in charge of airports of Axis. Undoubtedly Allied cooperation air-ground touched on this occasion concrete levels never before achieved.

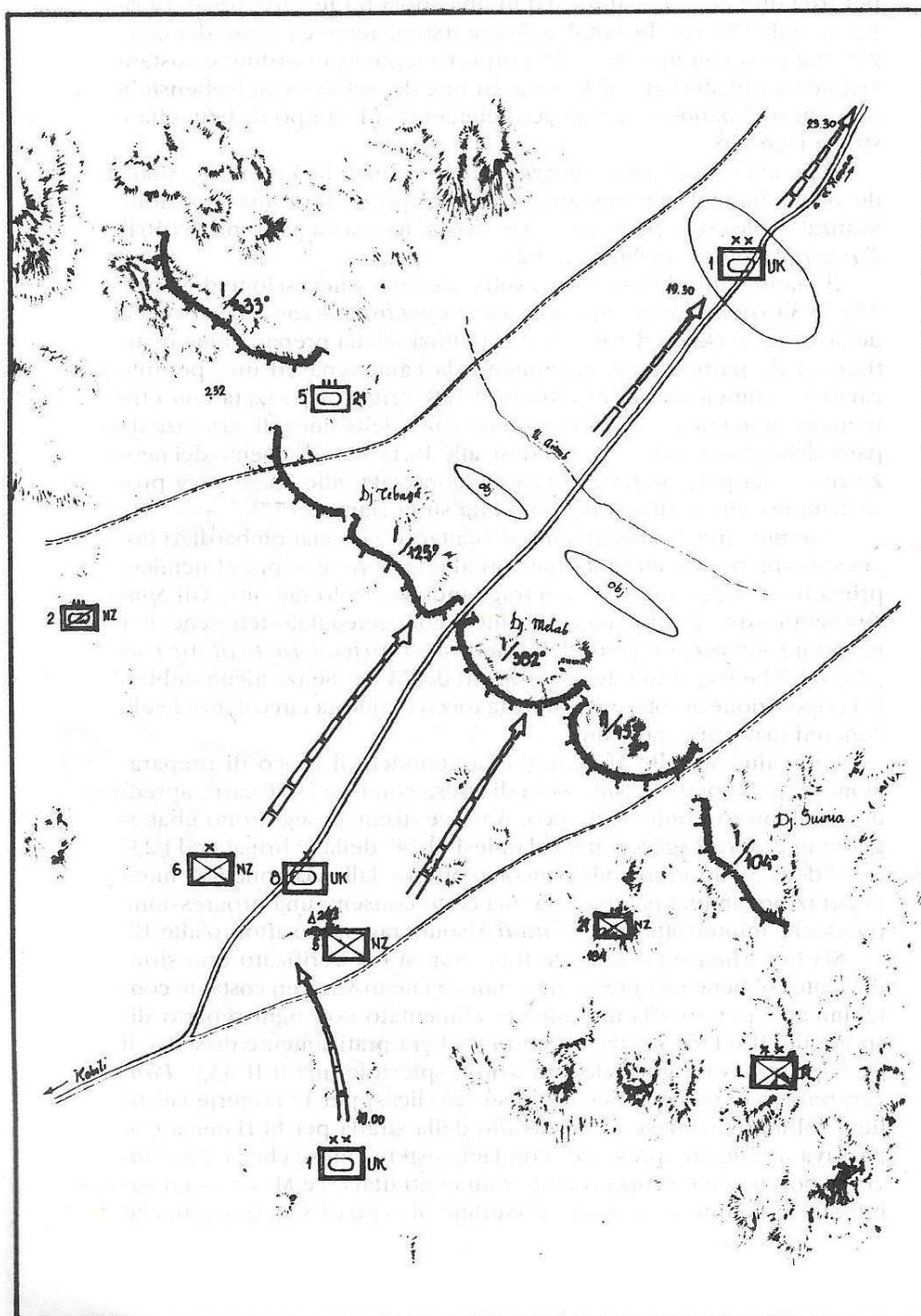
Promptly at 16:00 the artillery began fire of preparation and the 8th Arm. Bd. Left the waiting area with its 150 tanks, opening the entire front of attack. A short distance followed the first echelon New Zealand battalions: the 24th of the 6th Brigade and the 23rd and 28th of the 5th. The formidable aid offered by aviation did not change the operation in a walk, but allowed a certain progression almost uninterrupted until to the Aisoub *wadis*, reached around 18:00.

Let me be clear: after all there had been a breakthrough, but rather a continuous pressure which was a constant containment, albeit heavily supplied with each unit available. The I/115th *Panzergrenadiere* had virtually dissolved, 5th *Panzer* was wearing away in trivial actions, but the II/433rd *Panzergrenadiere* held well and the same goes for the infantry on the hills to the southeast. It was at the turn of the road to El Hamma passing the steamroller. Von Liebenstein asked that the 15th *Panzer* will bring within range for a counterattack and Messe joined immediately, but pointed to Bayerlein, Chief of the German Staff, who

The Allied activities in the area of El Hamma

Schizzo n. 62

L'ATTACCO ALLEATO NEL SETTORE DI EL HAMMA



von Liebenstein had already at hand the battalion of the *Luftwaffe* and 125th Inf. of the *La Spezia*.

But in the meantime had arrived the 1st Arm. Div., Bypassing the 8th Arm. Bd. and continuing immediately after. Moving in the head 2nd Arm. Bd. with 140 tanks, between *Sherman*, *Grant* and *Crusader*. He followed the 7th Motorized Bd. The division is slowly picked up in the area allocated to it and, as the clouds hid the moon, at midnight Gen. Briggs ordered the advance on El Hamma. He knew that the 15th and 21st Panzer total could not put together that seventy efficient tanks⁽⁷⁸⁾.

27 March.

Early morning Messe was forced to run for cover quickly because things seemed remarkably tangled. In the great confusion reigning, two battalions of the 164th Light had been swept away and the deployment of the artillery directly invested. At dawn the English 2nd Arm. Bd. was about five kilometers southwest of El Hamma, retained by a anti-tank screen that von Liebenstein had created in a hurry with three guns 88, four 50 and four 100 mm. field pieces. That night, also 63 *Halifax* and *Wellington* had bombed concentrations of vehicles in the area, causing another drain on already scarce availability of the Army⁽⁷⁹⁾.

The 164th Light, with the remains of the Saharan grouping, was then reinforced with two battalions of the 90th Light and two of the *Pistoia*. It had to stand between *Chott Fedjadj* and *Djebel Halouga*, whose northern part allowed strong flank support. The *Borowietz* group, essentially formed by the two *Panzerdivisionen* increasingly threadbare, had to stand in the south-east of the mentioned *Djebel* and fight at all costs any enemy penetration eastward to cover the retreat of the line of *Mareth* (sketch n. 63).

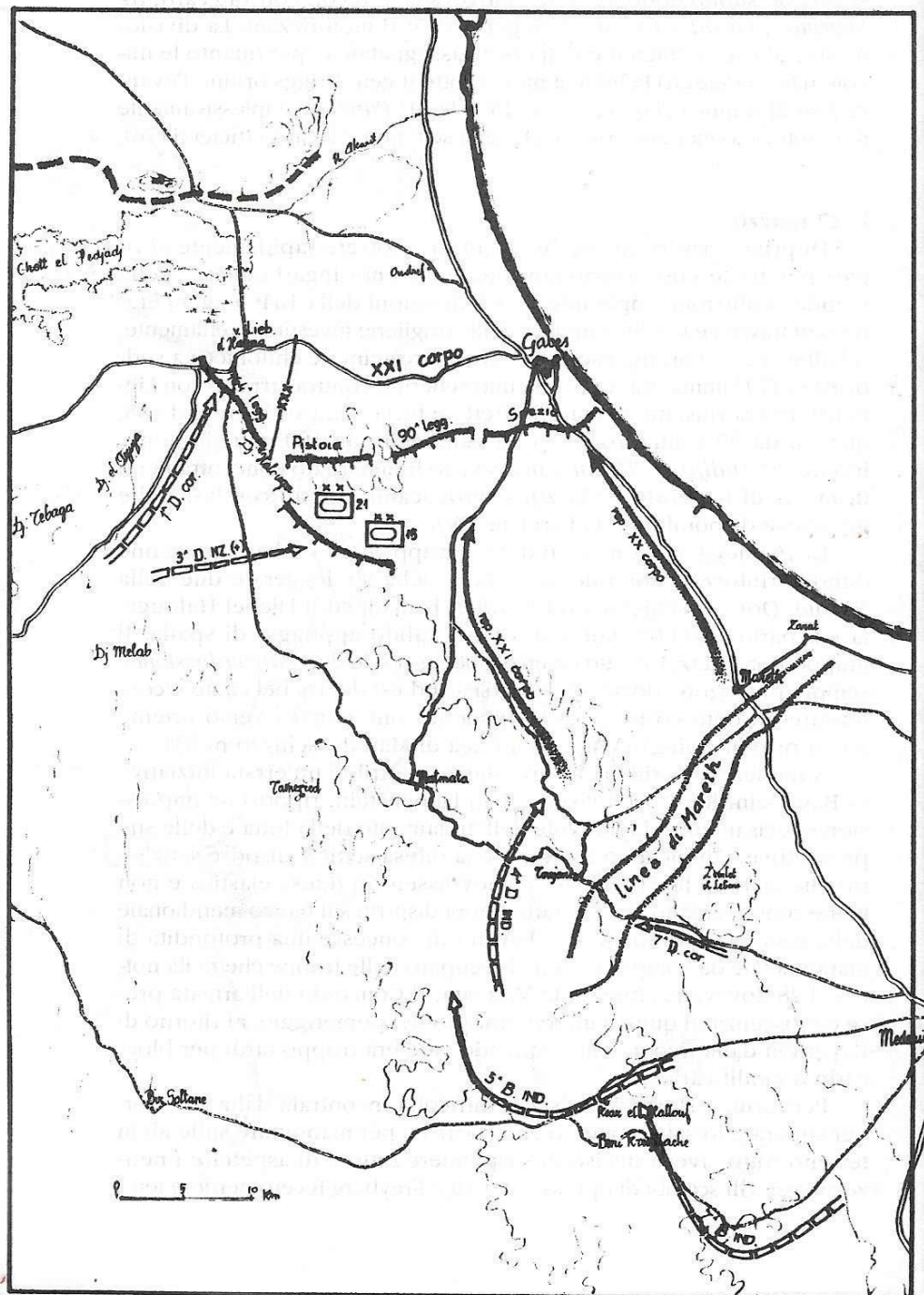
What makes it more critical circumstances contributed a wrong initiative of *Bayerlein*. He went to visit von Liebenstein, reported a very unfavorable impression of the trend of the struggle and its prospects. Judging a random static defense, certainly he ordered that the 15th and 21st *Panzer* maneuver in a elastic defense and paid no attention to the fact that units still arranged on the southern threshold still held. For more granted a depth of maneuver to hinder the recovery of the troops in the night on the 28th had to retire from *Matmata*. Command of the army took knowledge of this intervention only in the afternoon, to returned to *Bayerlein* of the reconnaissance, that is when it was too late to lock it or modify it.

Fortunately *Horrocks*, given the difficulties encountered by the 2nd Arm. Bd. to overcome the anti-tank deployment and to maneuver on the flanks in rough going, he decided to stay and wait for all the *New Zealanders*. Exchanges of opinion between him and *Freyberg* did lose time

The final stage of the abandonment of the line Mareth (March 27 to 28)

Schizzo n. 63

L'ULTIMA FASE DELL'ABBANDONO DELLA LINEA DI MARETH



and allowed Borowietz to interpret the order received in the sense of not feeling too tied to a defensive orientation and to develop with the few residues tanks a series of minor actions. They were simple pushes, but were sufficient to give rise to the feeling in the enemy that the *Panzerdivisionen* had recovered from the first shock.

Further south the XXI Corps was under pressure. The 4th Indian Division was submitting in the mountains of Matmata hoping to trap part of the Italian-German troops. The 5th Brigade, which the day before he had set foot in Ksar el Hallouf, approached Techine and Toujane and the 7th was following her. But the initial delay was not recovered: "*From the hill we saw all the plain of Gabes and the clouds of dust that rose,*" said the disappointed Gen. Toker⁽⁸⁰⁾.

In return, the 7th Arm. Div. had failed to take in the overnight Djebel Saikra creating a state of dangerous uncertainty. Berardi decided, around 09:00, to completely abandon the forward position and move the units to a position of strength, still intact. At 19:00 came to the vehicles for the permanent abandonment of the line. The last units of the XX Corp had already left.

28 March.

Obviously, the situation evolves induced to accelerate the organization of positions on Akarit and to consider the scheme introduced between El Hamma and Gabes another maneuver in retreat the near term. At 10:30 Messe issued a new orders. The Akarit - Chotts line was to be manned by the *Pistoia*, *Spezia* (less two battalions and a group) and two battalions of the 90th Light in command of Gen. Orlando. The El Hamma - Gabes line was entrusted to Gen. Berardi, Gen. Bayerlein remained with, with the 164th Light, the bulk of the 90th and a grouping of *La Spezia*. The task group had Borowietz as rearguard.

Serious concerns aroused for the Italian troops who were to the far left of the threshold of El Hamma, namely the *Novara* squads group, 350th Inf. and 125th Inf., ignoring if they had received trucks sent the day before. Unfortunately not all the means had arrived at their destination and the *Novara* group and 125th were captured⁽⁸¹⁾.

In the afternoon the big picture worsened. Berardi had taken responsibility for the El Hamma - Gabes line as expected and at first it seemed that even a short break could be ensured. Except that the outlet into the plain of Gabes the English 7th Arm. Div.. showed how suddenly was possible crisis requesting immediate action. Since then, the danger that a failure would compromise any recovery of the troops, Berardi sought permission to decide himself when necessary, to move back on Akarit. Even Bayerlein buzz about this concession. Messe authorized it but

He gave the directive to hold at least until the evening of the 29th. The emergency occurred that evening. While Messe von Arnim informed of the matter, Berardi was forced to order the abandonment of the positions (19:00 hours).

Von Arnim had thought elsewhere. Already considered successful, at least in broad terms, the withdrawal of the army on the line *Chotts - Akarit* and this not only improved the possibilities for defense against the 8th Army, but also enabled a more easy and profitable use of the reserves, especially in view of the new threat looming to the west. "*The sector most sensitive is at this time is that of Maknassy, if it is to come into play also the US 9th Infantry Division*" telegraphed Gen. Mattioli in Rome, in reporting the thoughts of the commander of Army Group ⁽⁸²⁾.

4. EVENTS IN SECTOR THE GERMAN 5th ARMY.

Since the beginning of March, Alexander had suggested to Gen. Anderson to improve his situation with a limited stakes offensive, taking advantage of the fact that von Arnim seemed to have moved to the south most of his armored troops and aircraft. The aim was to set the scene for the incursion of an armored column to Tunis. Anderson ordered generals Allfrey and Koeltz: the British 5th Corp had, in essence, to try to occupy the plateau north of the Beja-Medjez el. Bab roadway; the French 19th Corp to seize approaches to Pont du Fahs. The start date for these two actions was then set to 28 March: that of Tunis there was no time being fixed.

It will be good to point out that, along the way, the intentions of Anderson were very enlarged. It was no more than tactical local acts, but the commitment of the two corps, which, then, would be added the American 2nd Corp. The second phase, that is the main one, he was to lead to the annihilation of the 5th German Army and occupation of Tunis and Bizerte. In March, however, the British army had received the 1st Inf. Div. (Gen. Clutterbuck) with three infantry brigades and the 4th Inf. Div. (Gen. Hawkesworth) with two infantry brigades and one tank, in coming into the line with the 5th Corp by April 2. Moreover, among the numerous units arrived, they included two regiments of heavy artillery.

On March 25, Alexander issued the operation order, according to which Anderson had to regain the tactical initiative in northern Tunisia. Two days later the 46th Inf. Div. - who took his 138th Inf. Bd., the 36th Inf. Bd. the 78th Inf. Div. and the 1st Para. Bd. - And the French Corp. of Africa, reinforced by the II *Tabor* group, attacked the scant Axis troops in the division Manteuffel. The goal, Sedjenane, was reached on the afternoon of the 30th, after which started a week of stasis.

Alexander had assigned the American 2nd Corp also two objectives. The first covered preliminary nature and concerned the 34th Inf. Div. that, moving along the Hadjeb Aioun el-Nejjarin Okbi, it had to seize the high ground on the eastern Dorsale south of Fondouk. At a later stage, the 9th Corps, just formed as a reserve of the Army Group with the 6th Arm. Div., The 1st *Guards* Bd. and, indeed, the American 34th Inf. Div., it would open the way to Fondouk to reach Kairouan and cut your way to the Italian 1st Army.

At dawn on the 27th, then, Gen. Ryder pushed forward against the Fullriede sector. The Italian-German positions were held by a couple of battalions of German 961st Infantry, the German A-34 Battalion and the II/91st Inf. of the *Superga*. Despite every effort the Americans failed to create an opening for three days exhausted in local actions of poor consistency. The good will could not compensate for the training shortcomings and inexperience, so eventually Ryder had had enough and retreated a few kilometers, referring the matter to better times.

Further south Alexander wanted to accede to the request of an American advance beyond Maknassy formulated by Montgomery on the 21st, while considering it ambitious because of the location of the 10th *Panzer*, right at hand, so to speak. After all it was enough that the 10th *Panzer* remained embroiled so they can not move south. Therefore ordered that the 2nd Corp from seizing the threshold of Maknassy and was studying an operation tending to affect the lines of communication between Italy and Germany and to destroy the logistics center of Mahares. However, not to exceed the Fondouk-Faid-Maknassy alignment with important forces. Confidence in the encirclement by the Americans or certainty of the breakthrough by the British?

Following these guidelines, the afternoon of the 22nd Patton ordered Gen. Ward to force the defenses and settle firmly in control of Maknassy; then push a light armored column on the airport of Mezzouna, thirty kilometers beyond the objective (sketch n. 64). At the same time, Ward should aim to make a large raid with armored formation on Mahares.

The patrols had confirmed the information on the hastily preparations outlined by Imperiali extreme hilly circle around Maknassy and the information service had reported the likelihood of intervention of the 10th *Panzer* at any moment.

The attack began at 23:30 the same day. After half an hour of artillery preparation on the *Combat Command* at Gavanzò north of the road to Mezzouna and the 60th *Combat Team* south to cause the rupture of the deployment and open the outlet in the plain. *Combat Command B* was in charge of giving safety on the left side.

Except that Imperiali had begun to reinforce its deployment: first with the remains of the defenders of the station of Sened and then,

Schizzo n. 64

[illegible]

in the evening, with the Reisoli group - made up of the LXX motorized machine gun battalion with a tank company, a 75/18 battery propelled of semoventi with two sections 20mm - sent by the commander of XXX Corps.

The Americans action failed in the attempt. The next day, around noon, he got new German reinforcements: the *Kampfgruppe* Lang with the I/69th and I/86th *Panzergranadiere* and smaller units, the 10th *Panzer*. Gen. Sogno also showed up. He spoke with Imperiali and Col. Lang, while *Combat Command C* and the 60th *Combat Team* repeatedly trying to break through. The critical points were hill 322 of Djebel Naemia where *Kasta OB* fought desperately, and the Djebel Bou Douaou, held by a group of small intermingled units. Sogno had already come up with further inflows of units. Given the progress of the fight, he made the decision: immediate shift of the German A-26 Battalion into the Superga sector and a 100/17 battery from the Benigni sector; pushing the alignment towards Sidi Bou Zid and part of the *Reco Lodi* and the T assault battalion from the Faïd sector.

Even on the 24th the American attack was renewed. Taking part the I/6th Arm. Inf. reinforced to the north, the III/60th Inf. with a tank company to the center and III/6th Arm. Inf. also with a tank company to the south. But the defense, was fierce and well-supported by the scarce Axis aviation exploiting wonderfully every foothold and showed no signs of abating. Col. Lang, who had assumed responsibility for the sub-sector as part of the 50th Special Brigade, had now a heterogeneous but respectable grouping: the Reisoli group, Lang group, the A-26 battalion, 501st *Panzer* battalion with nine *Tiger* and fifteen Mark III and IV, 580th Recon. Bn., the *Kasta OB* (reduced to a few dozen men) and six Italian and German batteries of various calibers, including two of 88.

When Patton, who had spent many hours with the Gen. Allen returned to see what was happening at Maknassy, he was disappointed. The enemy, they said, "*was clearly concentrating*" on the front of the 1st Arm. Div. and increasing air raids. Ward had asked "*all the air cover available*" in favor of his troops for that afternoon and throughout the next day. Patton called Ward by phone and told him to personally lead the action the next morning whatever happens⁽⁸³⁾.

But the attack resumed on the 25th by the 6th Arm. Inf., As initially promised well, ran aground in a few hours under a deluge of barrier and arresting fire. At noon Ward threw in the towel: his troops were exhausted and had absolute need of reorganization.

In the area of El Guettar, as we know, the American 1st Inf. Div. had reported some successes, but without the advanced assuming the pace hoped. The cornerstones of the *Centauro* held and moreover it was not clear where was to be expected the intervention of the 10th *Panzer*. On the evening of the 22nd, this, unless the *Kampfgruppe* Lang, had gathered to the east of El Hafay. At 03:00 was set in motion.

The semi-circle described by the 1st Inf. Div. from Djebel Orbata to Djebel Berda were the 26th *Combat Team* to the left, 16th in the center and 18th to the right. The I Rangers Battalion faced the Djebel Berda (sketch n. 65). The German column - formed by I and II/7th *Panzer*, II/69th and II/86th *Panzergranadiere*, 10th motorcyclists battalion - appeared before dawn. He took head-on the III/16th Inf., The III/18th Inf. and the 601st *Tank Destroyer* Battalion and swept them away after a short but tough resistance, opening like a fan behind the American positions.

Here, however, he ran out the thrust. The 601st (which was partially destroyed) and the 899th *Tank Destroyer* Battalion and groups of artillery had knocked out about thirty German tanks and another ten had frozen amid minefields. Under the protection of his artillery, Gen. von Broich then had to withdraw the means of a few kilometers to prepare for a second attempt. At 16:45 he drove toward El Guettar, preceded by a wave of *Stuka*. American resistance was stoic and crushed any Germanic ambitions⁽⁸⁴⁾.

The fighting of the two days did not lead to substantial changes, but the set of events led Alexander to reconsider the use of the American 2nd Corps. Now the 9th and the 34th Inf. Div, remained on the Grande Dorsale, could enter the lists. The 9th (minus the 60th *Combat Team*) to join the sector of El Guettar; the 34th (less the 133rd *Combat Team*) in search a success in Fondouk.

As for the two divisions hitherto worked hard, all things seemed better to give up the planned incursion towards Mahares to focus, instead, on Gabes from El Guettar. The first phase of breaking of the positions was up to the 1st and the 9th Inf. Div.; the second phase, of exploitation of success, had to be developed by 1st Arm. Div. of Ward. The possession and the defense of the positions of Maknassy remained assigned to *Combat Command A*.

Meanwhile, the control of the south-east Algeria (Gen. Boissau), the right of the 2nd Corp, advancing coming to occupy the area between the Djebel Berda and *Chott El Fedjadj*.

At 06:00 of the 28th a new attack got under way. The stretch invested was also maintained by *Centauro*, but with the inclusion of German elements. The ridge of Djebel Orbata was already in American hands, except in its eastern part, towards Sened, where they were units of the *Centauro* and elements flowed from the Sened station. At the turn of the road to Mahares which the enemy called *Gumtree Road*, was stationed the Reinmann group, composed of II/86th *Panzergranadiere* and I/7th *Panzer*. On the western slopes of the Djebel Chemsî they were deployed in a bow the 49th pioneers battalion (facing west) and II/69th *Panzergranadiere* (facing north). Followed, a short barrage of the plain, and on the road to Gabes, four strong points of the *Centauro* manned by various units of the 132nd anti-tank, Bersaglieri, machine gunners, tank with batteries or sections of artillery also joined in

Schizzo n. 65

[illegible]

reinforcements of other divisions. Finally, on the Djebel Berda, the German 10th motorcyclists battalion. Among the Djebel Berda and Djebel Asker, where the French of Gen. Boissau were trying to slip in, were set on a Battlegroup II/131st Inf. and all remaining armored cars. Farther back a company of the XXIII CC.RR battalion. He watched from direction Kebili.

The division of Allen took the 18th Inf. against the Djebel Orbata, the 26th Inf. against the parts held by II/69th *Panzergrenadiere*, and the 16th Inf. against the central positions of the *Centauro*. He had to record again a stalemate. The 9th Inf. Div. (Gen. Eddy) moved keeping south of the road to Gabes with the 47th and 39th infantry but, when committed, also did not achieve concrete results.

The next day were repeated efforts; It was found in front of some fluctuations caused by local penetrations; there was a progressive deterioration. "*The situation – Gen. Calvi wrote in his report - emerges overall very serious. I have to send into the line of all men still available: engineers, unit of the tactical command, command units of the various units.*" And since nothing else had left, he went immediately to the rear of the cornerstones to make its presence felt ⁽⁸⁵⁾.

Despite the pessimism the enemy push was still contained. With great effort, but contained. "*We are trying to act with simplicity - Patton wrote to Gen. Marshall that night - not to change plans once defined and continue to fight*" ⁽⁸⁶⁾.

Alexander was puzzled and, to some extent, worried. He had to admit that the American 2nd Corp did not seem able to achieve the objectives assigned. The action assigned to the 34th Inf. Div. against Fondouk (on which we will return) was disappointing expectations; the breakthrough in Maknassy by the armor had failed; the repeated efforts of the 1st and 9th Inf. Div. on El Guettar gave no concrete results. He had to change the orientation and directives.

He could do another attempt, but now, before the retreat of the Italian 1st Army on the line *Chotts-Akarit* allow moving some units moving westward. The emergence of a strong-minded and ruthless armored column might have solved the problem. Patton put together the *Task Force Benson* a couple of tank battalions, as many infantry, a tank destroyer battalion and smaller units ⁽⁸⁷⁾ and ordered him to attack head-on the following day, as a result of the infantry action.

The morning of the 30th started the 9th Inf. Div. supported by the fire of all the artillery in place, but without effect. Shortly after the move also, facing the central section of the sector. At noon, feeling good the preliminary stage, departed the *Task Force Benson*. Nothing to do: the momentum quickly faded against artillery fire, the anti-tank guns, the few minefields. On the other hand, the 26th Inf. was stated towards the north-west of Djebel Chemsî, causing an unexpected situation.

Under the violent American pressure, overnight the German 49th pioneers battalion retreated, inviting the two Italian cornerstones to their left to imitate. These refused, having orders not to move without explicit higher order. Except that, later, the Commander of the 10th *Panzer* informed the *Centauro* that the cornerstones in question had been overcome and that, consequently, the 49th pioneers battalion had been forced to retreat to strike out a new line behind. Calvi, incredulous, sent an officer to check on the spot and around 08:00 knew the truth: the two cornerstones were still efficient, but on their right had created the vacuum⁽⁸⁸⁾. Such incidents were not new.

On the 31st, although the defense was increased by the arrival of the *Panzergranadiere Afrika* regiment and *Kampfgruppe* Pfeiffer sent by the 21st *Panzer*, saw repeated American attempts supported by an intense artillery fire. Some cornerstones were overwhelmed, others had to fall back and the line wobbled seriously. Two factors intervened to save the day in the afternoon: the arrival of the bulk of the 21st *Panzer* and uncertainties arising from inexperience American tactics unbalanced by the excellent weapons and from excellent unit equipment.

"The commanders of large units - observed Calvi - have shown their ability in the selection of appropriate lines of attack but hesitant then in conducting the action in depth. The commanders of the column proved somewhat below their task and often not been able to build on the success already achieved. Minors units, during the approach phase, adhered to obvious theoretical schemes, which was due not to the least by their severe losses"⁽⁸⁹⁾.

The same evening the residual forces of the *Centauro* were rearranged into two battle groups: one, under the command of Col. Remondino, remained in line with an part of the 21st *Panzer*, the other under the command of Col. Devoto, faced the French regimental group of Algeria to the Southeast between Djebels Berda and Asker. The command of the division was instead was withdrawn for use in other tasks.

5. EPILOGUE.

After the battle Messe sent to Ambrosio a report on the fighting incurred on lines of Mareth and El Hamma, and on the withdraw to the positions of *Chotts* and *Akarit wadi*⁽⁹⁰⁾.

Like all reports like that, the paper reported about the events and very frankly. Naturally resented by a certain incompleteness of information on the enemy, he painted the situation with the eye of those who are on the spot, praised the overall behavior of the troops, made some concessions to rhetoric, dwelt on the elements of superiority of the enemy and to negative ours.

Ambrosio received it on April 10 (had been delivered by an officer) and read it without relief, because not surfaced gradually change as reported by the reports of commanders and, moreover, knew too well the events and situation. Except that immediately had cause for astonishment when the radio, at 20:00 of the 14th, gave notice of the report and the newspapers of the capital on April 15, they released the full text (except for a few, omissions).

Rushed by Mussolini and knew Messe, directly thanking the Duce to the laudatory appreciation received towards the end of the battle, he had sent him a copy of the report, closing the letter with: "*The army has been greatly thinned and lacking time and, perhaps, even to reinstate the provision of heavy losses. However the firm decision to fight to the extreme is everything*" ⁽⁹¹⁾.

Ambrosio and also knew the answer autograph Mussolini:

-Dear Messe, your report on the first victorious battle on the line of [sic] Mareth is so alive, throbbing, comprehensive that I decided to make it known through the press -a -this Italian people. I have introduced only minor variations for understandable reasons (...).

From late March to now the situation has changed, that it has become more difficult. Let me tell you that I count on you to continue the resistance to the extreme and so disrupt - at least as far as the sequence of the times - the enemy's plans which aim to land on the continent, after landing on the islands.

And again, we do and will do the *impossible* to supply the necessities (...)" ⁽⁹²⁾.

A few words of comment. First, the decision to hand over the report to the press, note well, secret. Apart from the astonishment of the Italian public – the ally, enemy and neutral - for the disclosure, during the war, a document that realistically illustrated the serious and irreparable condition of inferiority in which the Italian soldier was forced to fight, some news and findings constituted effective weapon for enemy propaganda and could be exploited in the operational. Mention of units, the balance of power, etc. They put undue prominence our poverty qualitative and quantitative means and materials: for example, the "*vast and frightening gaps*" in the preparation of the army in mid-March; the need for renunciation of counter-battery both to the lower range of our pieces for both the low ammunition; the lack of an air mass. Certain statements let transpire diversity of views on the conduct of the battle between von Arnim and Messe, which could give rise to some unfortunate controversy against the vaunted Italian-German collaboration. Other statements implicitly recognized the Italian forces a clear failure in the fields of organization and training, especially in comparison with the enemy: the elevated appreciation of infantry, armored troops, artillery,

the genius of British aviation, everything sounded open admission of a impossible comparison.

Nor were spared the commanders and the General Staffs:

"The Leaders and General Staffs [British] are tested and selected with severity on the battlefield and not riddled with cumbersome theories, built in closed barely ambulatory of abstract speculations, outside the reality of combat. The commanders are granted freedom equal to the responsibility and wealth of resources that are entrusted to them."

The episode controversy is evident. But the worst was in the conclusions. The say, after the high valuation of the enemy and the profession of our misery, that "the 1st Army, as severely diminished in its military potential of men and weapons, reaches out to new events with unshakable faith and firm determination to give all of herself to the extreme - sentence, the latter, fist of Mussolini to replace the original "*to be equal to the height of the historical moment that the country spends*" - amounted to a "*Morituri te salutant!*"*"⁽⁹³⁾.

The losses of the army were serious, and above all is the regret for those due to the known lack of means of transport. They can be summarized as follows:

a) Italian units:

Giovani Fascisti Inf. Div.: X/8th Bers. and V/7th Bers.;

Trieste Inf. Div.: a total of a company;

Spezia Inf. Div.: Command, I and II/125th Inf.;

Pistoia Inf. Div.: a total of five companies and five batteries;

Saharan Battalion Grouping. *Savona* border guard Battalion., VI CC.NN. Bn., *Novara* Squ. group., a anti-tank company, a 81 mortars company, two companies and sixteen batteries Saharan largely positional.

b) German units:

164th Light Inf. Div.: two battalions;

Panzergrenadiere Afrika Regiment: a battalion;

other forces of two battalions;

ten batteries.

Total: 16 battalions, 31 batteries and 91 tanks. For the 1st Army were very sensitive loss. The prisoners, according to British source, amounted to 7,000, of which about 2,500 Germans.

By the middle of the battle it has been exalted as bright victory due to the ability shown by the commander of the 8th Army in the conduct of the action. These recognized be the battle harder after El Alamein, which is not surprising, given the material impossibility for ACIT to face a second battle

*Latin = ("those who are about to die salute you")

Cyrenaica or Tripolitania and no intention of his boss to accept it. Attributed to the exceptional strength of Mareth position, which seems exaggerated given the limited size of the passive obstacle, the shallow depth of the position of strength, the immense extension of the western flank barely controlled. Criticism of Rommel (!) For having scattered his armored units using them piecemeal, which seems totally unfair: in view of the disproportion between the line to defend and troops available, do not see how it would be possible to mass with a *Panzerdivisionen* in one sector if not when possible, and with transfers dramatic for the wear of the tanks and the fuel consumption. He stressed that the speed of movement of gravitation effort from the coastal route to the desert prevented Rommel (!) To run for cover in time, but flew gladly on a couple of points. First, that the long march of the Zealander Corps was seen very quickly (and could not be otherwise) by the Axis commands and, if there was an German-Italian air force barely adequate to the task, probably the enterprise of Freyberg would encounter difficulties such that it becomes very difficult. Second, that the defense is to plug a hole he was to discover another, and consequently the review of Messe was necessarily carried out with as yet possible to remove from the position of strength and with the vehicles that were there.

The excessive power of the 8th Army was absolute, yet the frontal attack failed significantly. He managed the flank because he met an opposition of insufficient quantitatively, not anchored to the ground and at the mercy of the *Western Desert Air Force*. Moreover, the undoubted victory opposing not attained the intended purposes: the lightning attack on the threshold of El Hamma was gradually curbed so as to allow a withdrawal of the army still in good condition, and the English 30th Corp could not hold the XX and XXI Italian Corps on the line of Mareth it even less binding on the German armored reserves.

The move on the flank was "*a brilliant idea, a master stroke*" according to Liddell Hart ⁽⁹⁴⁾, but - of course as always a study of the hypothesis -you could talk about the effects of a hammer blow launched from the beginning in the sector of El Hamma. However it is quite likely to consider this attack as a natural and necessary adaptation of the original plan, given the failure on the Zigzagou wadi ⁽⁹⁵⁾.

What a breakthrough at El Hamma or El Guettar could provoke a indescribable crisis it was clear to all Italian and German commanders. Even obvious. So it had to be for the enemy. Messe was forced to fight in the terrible conditions of inferiority and with one eye constantly behind, knowing in such distress being debated even von Arnim. Any move of the Allies became a mortal threat anywhere exercised: the coast, the mountains of Matmata, the Djebel Tebaga,

the threshold of El Hamma, to the pass of El Guettar, to Maknassy. The game of chess had seen the decisive Allied move with the operation *Torch*, now this was the end game, a final outcome for granted to the detriment of the Axis: or checkmate or abandonment. A critical examination of an operational nature can only be limited to judge more or less correct use of the few Axis forces. It would be wrong to expect to linger for a case study. Von Arnim, and Messe von Vaerst did not solve tactical problems: simply did what they could.

Finally the case ... Rommel. It is known that Montgomery - unlike Churchill and Alexander - has always explicitly stated that Rommel was his antagonist both at Mareth and at Akarit, deliberately ignoring in his writings the departure of the Field Marshal from Tunisia immediately after the battle of Medenine. Evidently he kept him.

NOTES TO CHAPTER VI

- (1) DSCS, tele 0447 /Op./A date 02/23/1943, 17:30.
- (2) DSCS, tele 1527 date 02/24/1943, at 02:15 of the Army Group Africa.
- (3) Giovanni Messe, *La mia armata in Tunisia*, Rizzoli, Rome 1960, p. 120.
- (4) *Ibid.*
- (5) The next day, speaking to Ciano, Messe called himself "the commander of misfits" and expressed amazement for prospects of war put forth by Mussolini. "*All this - said Ciano - depends on whether Cavallero illustrates a situation quite different from reality and draws in deliberate deception Duce*" (G. Ciano, *op. citata*, p. 692).
- (6) G. Messe, *op. cited* above, p. 121.
- (7) The Col. Bayerlein was replaced by Major von Bonin until operation *Capri.*, chief of the operations office of the ACIT.
- (8) The push of the measure stemmed from a alleged, which can not otherwise be defined, of Rommel. As mentioned, the field marshal had delayed the transfer of the command, however questionable, the issue may still be accepted. But on February 18, while he was in full swing of the *Angriffsgruppe Nord* offensive, Rommel proposed that Messe assumed the command of the troops of the ACIT on the Mareth line, while maintaining command of the army himself. Obviously the rejection was clear.
- (9) DSCS, memorandum date 02/01/1943 of Gen. Messe -Appendix n. 16.
- (10) DSCS f. 159/Op. date 02/08/1943 Command the army - Appendix n. 17.
- (11) With the evacuation of the entire military organization of Libya into Tunisia had poured a large amount of commands at various levels and services of each kind with hundreds of officers and non-commissioned officers and a few thousand soldiers. Naturally was drawing liberally between them to complete, within the limits of specialization, the unit; However, the average level a training and spirit of them was rather low.
- (12) DSCS, f. 0346/Op. A date 02/17/1943 - Appendix n. 18.
- (13) The tankers were available the *Langaner* (German) of 14,000 tons. flow, intended to supply the Sicily; the *Tborsheimer* of 6,500 tons., the *Bivona* 1,800 and *Labor* 500. In preparation was the *Abruzzi* of 600 tons. flow, intended to supply Sardinia, and *Steropes* and *Regina* of 14,000 tons.
- (14) The report in question was published by historian EMS in 1950 under the title "*La 1a armata italiana in Tunisia*". It is based on that given August 17, 1943 the Comando Supremo by Lt. Col. Mario Revetria, head office operations of the army, and by Major. Ottorino Ottaviani.
- (15) B. Liddell Hart, *Rommel papers* cit., P. 409.
- (16) B. Montgomery, *Da El Alamein*, cit., P. 67.
- (17) F. de Guingand, *op. cited* above, p. 239.
- (18) Alexander H., *op. cited* above, p. 110.
- (19) F.H. Hinsley, *op. cited* above, pp. 593-594.
- (20) Irving, *op. cited* above, pp. 293-294. On March 17, referring to the situation represented by Rommel in conversation with Hitler a week earlier, Goebbels wrote: "Today in North Africa there is almost half a dozen different commands with different wills, and work counteracting each other. Rommel , Kesselring, Arnim, the Supreme Command in Rome, the Italian local commanders and so on. It's terrible conduct a war when authorities and courts make such a mess "(J. Goebbels, *op. cited* above, p. 407).
- (21) DS command 1st army, f. Liso /Op. date 03/02/1943 - Appendix n. 19. After the war,

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Gen. Ziegler recalled: "It was not easy to convince the field marshal of the impossibility, tactically, an offensive action from the north, that he would have liked. They had to be his most widely and sometimes minutely explain why his plan of attack on Medenine there was disparity of opinions. Field Marshal Rommel saw, with its epicenter in the attack south of Medenine, too grave a danger that the forces deployed there could be cut out or at least decisively engaged

the reserves of the enemy from the south-east. He did not want to run that risk at no cost. Therefore he ordered to amend the plan so that the center of action of armored forces was established north of Medenine and that such action was therefore directed towards high locations south of Metameur, where was the concentration of enemy artillery. Even the 10th Armored Division was to advance in the direction of Metameur, north of Medenine. This reworking of the plan was formally executed on 2 March-(Paul Carell, *Le volpi del deserto*, Baldini and Castoli, Milan, 1961, p. 580).

(22) G. Messe, the report cited above, p. 62. Messe also just handed to Gandin about the most pressing needs of the army. Among these, stood three or four *complaints*. 50% of the vehicles was inefficient mainly due to lack of spare parts, for which the consignments had to understand how "drops" were not able to make any changes to the current situation and how it was necessary to establish the monthly arrival of three submarines loads only of spare parts. In the access network, it was urgent shipment of two thousand kilometers of telephone cord, because the army does not possess even a kilometer. For accommodation defensive line of Mareth and Akarit-Chotts continued expectation of 400,000 mines and materials for reinforcements already requested and encouraged. Finally, on moral grounds, it could not skimp with the basic provisions and especially to admit such a disastrous operation of the postal service (from February 24 did not arrive mail from Italy).

(23) B. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel papers* cit., Pp. 416-417.

(24) F.H. Hinsley, *op. cited* above, p. 594.

(25) F. de Guingand, *op. cited* above, p. 243.

(26) *Ibid*, p. 245.

(27) In his report Messe wrote: "It was not possible to ascertain, from the prisoners, if the enemy was aware of the project operating by the information service of Tunisia or more deep; the fact is that the news already from beginning of the month circulated persistently in Rome in various ministries, including non-military, where it was not secret ". (P. 64, note 1). However, that in Rome the word going around of a forthcoming Axis offensive not think can be considered as the leak itself: anyone who was able to realize that Rommel now had to turn against the 8th Army. The fact is that too many things had seemed known to the enemy. Precisely for this reason there were repercussions in London.

March 9 *Ultra* deciphered messages and it was demonstrated how the Italian-Germans headquarters were convinced, on the basis of interrogation of prisoners and captured documents, that the 8th Army knew in advance not only the imminence of an offensive, but also the date, the plan and the size of the operation. Now, it seemed unlikely that the Axis services information thought to decrypt of *Enigma* messages, however, by the British was considered appropriate a stronger caution in the use of information provided by *Ultra*. This explains the long silence on the official start of Rommel.

(28) B. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, cit., Pp. 416-417.

The result obtained Montgomery wrote Gen. Brooke: "Rommel attacked me at dawn. It was a real madness on his part. I five anti-tank guns with bullets of six pounds placed on the ground; I have four tanks and a good infantry who holds the key points and a great concentration of artillery. It is a beautiful gift, our man must be mad "(A. Bryant, *op. cited* above, p. 523).

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- (29) Irving, *op. cited* above, p. 298.
- (30) Who knows if Rommel at that moment he remembered when, in late November 1942, he left the ACIT on his own initiative, without even warning Bastico, to go to Rastenburg!
- (31) The colonels Westphal and Bayerlein had been promoted to a higher rank in those days, and the first had passed to the OBS.
- (32) A. Kesselring, *op. Cited* above, pp. 160-161.
- (33) DSCS, report synthesis required by Mar. Kesselring 03/10/1943 sent by Gen. Mattioli, chief Liaison of the Italian G.S. to the Army Group Commander - Appendix n. 20.

- (34) DS Command 1st Army, f. 1094/43 of the date 03/13/1943 Command of the Army Group Africa, Appendix. 21.
 - (35) V. Zincone, *op. cited* above, pp. 141-145.
 - (36) B. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, cit., P. 418.
 - (37) *Ibid.*
 - (38) The Gen. Jeschonnek, head of G.S. of the *Luftwaffe*, was later to comment that Rommel appeared "very down in the dumps with nerves literally to pieces" (Irving, *op. cited* above, p. 300). In return, Goebbels presented things in a completely different way. In fact he had to write: "*He made a report on Tunisia that really loved the Fuhrer. Rommel is back to have in hand all the good cards*" and, referring to the meeting of 13 afternoon between Hitler, Goering and Rommel, he noted: "*At the time it was established that Tunisia will be held in any case, and this especially for a special regard for our Italian ally*" (J. Goebbels, *op. cited* above, p. 396).
 - (39) B. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, cit., P. 419.
 - (40) DSCS, letter from Hitler to Mussolini date 03/14/1943 - Appendix n. 22. The letter stemmed from a meeting held that same day at Rastenburg between Hitler, Doenitz, Keitel, Jodl and Kesselring. On this occasion, all had agreed on the strategic importance of Tunisia and dependence on supplies for the beachhead. It was not the 80,000 tons treated by the Italians, but rather 150,000 or 200,000. This was the order of magnitude. And since the aerial supply was unthinkable, it was necessary to provide by sea. Italians were to be placed starkly confronted with the choice: either make the impossible to ensure supplies or lose Tunisia and Italy with it.
 - (41) DSCS, tele 30903 / Op. date 03/16/1943, 13.45.
 - (42) DSCS, tele 536 date 03/16/1943, at 18:00 (first part) and 18:45 (second part) of Gen. Mattioli. The aforementioned meeting of 16 March between Kesselring and von Arnim was reported in a summary that glosses over the meaning attributed to the operating line of Chotts. Field Marshal began by criticizing a certain mental attitude. It was very wrong, he argued, always give orders to defend to the bitter end and then leave the position of the opponent in the first attempt. With this way of doing, no one would stop even the line of Chotts!
- Von Arnim says that orders were from the OKW Kesselring and then said that the intention of the Fuhrer the Mareth line had to be defended to the last. At this point, von Arnim was explicit: "*I ask for a written order to show me exactly what my task. The directives given me in December to push me towards Casablanca were clearly exceeded by events*". Kesselring promised and added that he thought the tasks were clear: "*The 5th Army must keep current positions and continuous offensive thrusts to hinder the preparations of the enemy and weaken it as much as possible. For the army is to stand on line Mareth to the last man*" (Hans-Georg von Eisebeck, *Rommel et l'Afrika Kotps*, Payot, Paris, 1950, p. 202).
- (43) DSCS respectively tele 30904/Op. date 03/16/1943, 23 hours, and tele 30906/Op. On 03/17/1943, at 10:40. The two telegrams were derived from many talks between Ambrosio and Kesselring. The first occurred at 19:00 of March 16, in which the Chief of Staff General had shared the idea of the defense to the bitter end on the line of Mareth "*avoiding that the 1st Army is destroyed.*" The second, at 8.30 am the next day, where it was accepted the formula of defense first to Mareth with appropriate phasing in depth. Kesselring, who reported the guidelines made at Rastenburg,

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predicted sending the rest of *Hermann Goering* and the 999th Division.

(44) DS Commander of the 1st Army, f. 1686/Op. date 03/13/1943 - Appendix n. 23.

(45) G. Howe, *op. cited* above, p. 525.

(46) The hope of giving the division a true Armored form had faded to the point that Messe proposed to the Comando Supremo of turning it into a mechanized division, with 5th Bersaglieri, 132nd Anti-tank, a tank battalion and the 131st artillery.

The events solved the problem.

- (47) H.G. von Eisebeck, *op. cited above*, p. 203.
- (48) The *Group* is equivalent to the Italian *stormo*. The American *Command* an air force corresponds to the air division.
- (49) H. Alexander, *D'El Alamein*, cit., P. 201.
- (50) As described, surprised some categorical statements: "At this time the activities of the Germans focused on something extra Gafsa (...) that on Mareth (...) because to Gafsa the American II Corps (...) the 17 had gained momentum the city, giving a brilliant demonstration of the way in which Alexander managed to hold Amim in a constant state of insecurity (...) " (KJ Macksey, *Lo sfondamento della linea di Mareth*, in Rizzoli-Purnell, *History of World War II* cit., p. 515).
- (51) G. Messe report cit., P. 104.
- (52) On 20 March, the first day of battle, *Ultra* will confirm that the 10th *Panzer* possessed 57 tanks, the 15th of only 38 and 21st of 74. The *Centauro* had 27. Total: 196 efficient tanks (FH Hinsley, *op. cited above*, p. 598). The strength of the Italian 1st Army was estimated at 73,000 men with 455 pieces of small and medium caliber cannons 480 A/T 88 and 75 cannons.
- (53) Summary meeting with von Arnim-Messe on 03/18/1943 - Appendix n. 24. Von Arnim closed the meeting by asking the help of Messe to solve a big problem: about 350,000 living with the rations that were just 70,000 fighters! It is clear that the figure of 350,000 refers to the entire Tunisia. The strength of the two armies on the date of 20 March resulted in supreme command of 148,000 men (including 50,000 in Germany) at the armed men and 70,000 (including 32,000 in Germany) at the 5th Army, with a total of 218,000. The difference would then refer to the units of the Navy and Air Force, to the Intendenza Tunisia and civilian workers.
- (54) DS Commander 1st Army, date 03/19/1943.
- (55) F.H. Hinsley, *op. cited above* pp. 598-599.
- (56) B. Montgomery, *Memoirs*, cit., P. 161.
- (57) "The wadi Zigzagou -worte Alexander - (...) *was like the moat of a medieval fortress and our troops mounted their assault as if it were the taking of Badajoz*" (H. Alexander, *D'El Alamein*, cit., p. 118).
- (58) I.S.O. Playfair, *op. cited above*, p. 339, and G. Howe, *op. cited above*, p. 552. Churchill reports in his memoirs a message to Montgomery, he directed, similar content, in which, however, there is no mention of the Americans: "(...) *The enemy has obviously going to stand up and fight and I prepare a very bitter battle in the field of Mareth, which can last several days. It may be that the action of the Zealander Corp working in the field of Gabes affect the battle decisively*" (op. cited above, p. 400).
- (59) Reported by G. Howe, *op. cited above*, p. 489.
- (60) Following the warning to Sogno that if Imperiali had not been able to resist to the stat. Sened, fewer still would have been in Maknassy, Italian and German reinforcements were sent onsite.
- (61) G. Messe report cit., P. 124.
- (62) I.S.O. Playfair, *op. cited above*, p. 340.
- (63) *Ibid*, p. 343.
- (64) *Ibid*, p. 341.
- (65) B. Montgomery, *Memoirs* cit., P. 162.
- (66) B. Montgomery, *From El Alamein*, cit., Pp. 80-81.

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- (67) Leese had presented to communicate the failure of the attempt on the *wadi Zigzagou* 2am. Because during the Battle of El Alamein the crisis occurred at the same time on 25 October, Montgomery said amending the plan as conventional, and good wishes, to *Supercharge*.
- (68) Summary meeting von Arnim-Messe on 03/24/1943 - Appendix n. 25.
- (69) The Comando Supremo asked for an explanation on the subject and Messe reported in detail, but without any polemical spirit, also because there was more to think about.
- (70) I.S.O. Playfair, *op. cited* above, p. 344. See. W.G. Stevens, Bardia to Enfidaville, Wellington, pp. 198-199.

- (71) F. de Guingand, *op. cited above*, p. 257.
- (72) A. Kesselring, *op. cited above*, p. 161.
- (73) *Ibid*, p. 162.
- (74) report in Gen. Messe, p. 137.
- (75) DS Commander 1st Army, tele. 718 date 03/25/1943 Commander Army Group.
- (76) F.H. Hinsley, *op. cited above*, pp. 601-602.
- (77) W.G. Stevens, *op. cited above*, p. 206-207.
- (78) F.H. Hinsley, *op. cited above*, p. 602.
- (79) Messe did not hide his concern to the Comando Supremo: "*I would consider it highly desirable the presence of the operations office chief or at least chief of the African theater* " telegraphed to Rome (DS Commander 1st Army, tele 2439/Op. Date 03/27/1943, 04:00 hours) . From the Comando Supremo it was announced departure, 29 January of Silvio Rossi, chief of the new department.
- (80) Francis Taker, *La 4a divisione indiana entra in azione*, in Rizzoli-Purnell, *op. cited above*, p. 524.
- (81) The Novara group loaded weapons and a few pieces on the few trucks that came and went walking with the 15th Panzer, but when this fell back in the afternoon the bulk of Novara remained isolated and was captured.
- The 25th Inf. He was also on foot and its commander, determined not to abandon the positions without a specific order of the 21st Panzer Command, which determined, resolved to defend themselves on the spot rather than fall back on foot to the position of Gabes. Occurred the enemy, after a vain attempt at resistance surrendered.
- (82) DSCS, tele 814 date 03/27/1943, 23:58 hours of Gen. Mattioli.
- (83) "*Pink, you have not got that hill? - Asked Patton - Feel, I do not want the usual excuses of hell. I want you to go personally attack me and you take that hill. You have to control the attack in person. And do not come back until you got it*" (Omar N. Bradley, speaks a soldier, Mondadori, Milano 1952, p. 102). See. G. Howe, *op. Cited above*, p. 556.
- (84) Mindful of Kasserine and comments British Gen. Allen told his men not exaggerating by saying that at stake is not only the honor: the military credibility of all American troops to the front depended on how that day would the 1st Inf. Div. do facing a *Panzerdivision* (Ralph Ingersoll, Secret, Dear, Milan, 1946, p. 218).
- (85) Report of Gen. Calvi di Bergolo on the Battle of Guettara (21 to 31 March 1943).
- (86) G. Howe, *op. cited above*, p. 569.
- (87) The *Task Force Benson* was composed of: II/1st Tank, III/13th Tank, 81st reconnaissance battalion, 899th Tank Destroyer Battalion, II/6th Arm. Inf., III/69th Inf., 65th and 68th artillery Bn. and a engineer company.
- (88) Cited report Gen. Calvi.
- (89) *Ibid*.
- (90) DS Commander 1st Army, f. 338/2205 Secret date 04/05/1943, Appendix. 26.
- (91) B. Mussolini, *op. cited above*, p. 28.
- (92) *Ibid*.
- (93) It is to be assumed that the publication of the report Messe has not found favor with the German. Goebbels wrote a zero in his diary: "*The Italians have published quite unnecessarily a detailed report on the battle of North Africa, where lavish great praise to the British. It was not really necessary! From this report the British come out better*

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than the Germans. It is clear because the Italians do this. they try to make at least explainable their shameful defeat and their pusillanimous conduct. Any ratio is simply crazy "(op. cit. p. 448).

(94) B. Liddell Hart, *Military history*, etc., P. 589.

(95) See. the final considerations of Messe on the battle in *La mia armata in Tunisia* cit., pp. 179-188.

Chapter Seven

THE ALLIED ATTACK ON THE CHOTTS-AKARIT LINE

1. THE POLITICAL-MILITARY SITUATION WITH THE FIRST OF APRIL.

As mentioned, March 17 Ambrosio had indicated to the commander of the Army Group Africa a line of conduct: possibly expand westward with the 5th Army, to defend to the bitter end between the positions of Mareth and those of *Chotts* with the 1st Army. This much to obey the political leadership of the war for strategic choice. Since then, and increasingly during the Battle of Mareth, the Comando Supremo strive in search of some semblance of acceptable solution. Three draft guidelines were prepared by the operations within ten days.

The first of the 19th, drew attention to a likely British effort against the 5th Army in contemporary offensive against the 1st Army and suggested the location of the reserves of the army in the area south of Kairouan, well to run, to the occurrence, to bar delicate direction of Gafsa-Maknassy. And, alongside the responsibility of the 1st Army to close the direction Gafsa-El Guettar, reiterated the need to continue the resistance in central Tunisia. It was launched because Ambrosio, very skeptical about the fate of the theater, would explicitly mention the risk of an inevitable retreat in the box of Tunis, bounded by the alignment Cape Serrat - Enfidaville: an eventuality that would place the Army Group with back to the sea and then had to accept only as a last resort. Obviously necessary to take into account such a case, protected, of course, the retarding action carried out by mobile units. This was said in the draft prepared on March 20.

But Ambrosio preferred to defer: Mareth came from some cause for hope, so maybe it was better not to formulate the hypothesis still worse. Besides, it was worth waiting for the return of Kesselring from yet another whirlwind trip to Tunisia.

The conversation between the two military leaders took place at noon on the 23rd at the Palazzo Venezia. Kesselring reported that he had discussed the situation with von Arnim, who showed no apprehensions on the front of the 5th Army, so he was withdrawing from the line four or five battalions to constitute a reserve. Messe, however, while showing confidence, seemed geared toward a retreat to Akarit, where the events were at times for the worst. For the time being there was to record the success reported by the 15th *Panzer* in the sector of *Giovani Fascisti*: 190 prisoners and about forty tanks destroyed, with the loss of 150 dead and wounded and one tank. The counter attack of the 21st *Panzer* in Mannerini was getting partial results, the main problem of the terrain. To the Northwest of the situation

around Gafsa was uncertain: discrete at El Guettar, much less brilliant at Maknassy. It was necessary to await the outcome of the action being applied by the DAK.

Ambrosio listened attentively, asking a few questions, then motioned to the guidelines prepared in draft form designed to "*prevent General von Arnim sacrifice the whole of the 1st Army of Messe*". Kesselring remembered that von Arnim had been granted "*freedom of action to Gabes, in the defense of the line of Mareth and that of Sciott*". And Ambrosio merely remarked that the draft had simple value of study. Then he finished with a "*tonight at 20:15 can brief directly the Duce your last impressions*"⁽¹⁾. You do not know the details of the appointment in the evening, but it should be considered that nothing else was said.

Already from the previous month Ambrosio had found his battles about the unsatisfactory behavior ally, which, if not fundamentally changed, would have caused the need for autonomous decisions. In a note of February 17 -the first question about the war presented to the Duce -He had written:

"(...) But above all, this is the moment in which the ally must stop fighting its own war and to understand that their salvation is also important to stop on the Dnieper as in Sicily or in the Peloponnese (...). In conclusion, the Germans must change operational intentions and must help us, *otherwise we will never be obliged to follow them in their misconduct of War*"⁽²⁾.

And a few days later, in a new and broader panoramic look, he had spoken with confidence on how to conceive the war in Russia by German:

"(...) In the East do not see decisive strategic objectives (...). If the Germans for reasons of prestige, as well as material needs, they wanted to push the reconquest of the industrial region of Don and that of the oil region of the Caucasus, would find themselves (...) in the same situation in which they are found in October 1942 (...). They will no longer be effective in 1944 to continue the fight because the actions of the next summer will have worn down and decimated the latest human resources. Committed in the East in a current offensive, Germany can not simultaneously oppose, for lack of reserves that is, an attack on the Anglo-American forces in the same time will develop into a point still unknown European coasts, without seriously jeopardizing the eastern front .

(...) The threat against the Italian coast and the Balkans (...) is more distant in time, because without the conquest of Tunisia the opponent is not able to carry out an operation in a big way. Point is then maintained as long as the possession of Bizerte. The Italian Supreme Command (...) will make every possible effort (...). But should henceforth consider the case that you lose possession of Tunisia. In this case are directly threatened our islands, the peninsula and the Balkan coasts (...)"⁽³⁾.

On March 13, leaving from the royal hearing, Ambrosio had told the Gen. Struts: "*Tunisia is now lost. It is only a matter of time*"⁽⁴⁾. In this state of mind, for the third time in about a month,

Mussolini made a serious appreciation of the strategic situation. Tunisia was a clear renunciation of all hope:

“1. The possession of Tunisia is subject to a marked aerial predominance and a continuous and adequate flow of supplies. These two conditions do not exist now (...).

2. The above perspective, that is, the possibility that Tunisia can not be maintained, leads immediately to consider two questions:

a) Whether it is appropriate to continue to throw men and equipment into the Tunisian furnace, playing into the hands of the enemy, or to reserve the one and the other for the serious tasks to take place.

b) At the last moment the Allied will ask for ships for the flow of materials. These must not be granted, because Italy has no ships to spare. One must consider that even after abandoned Tunisia, ships will be required to supply the Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, Albania, Greece and the Aegean, and that all enemy attack traffic, which now mainly occurs on our traffic for Tunisia, will pour on traffic to other theaters of war. These trades will be extremely costly, and in anticipation of that we can not lose ships”⁽⁵⁾.

It is surprising the lack of a nod to the alternative of a Dunkirk for the benefit of the Army Group Africa, even in theoretical terms. But it is very likely that such an alternative at that point had already been dismissed as totally unrealistic. Resulted in too obvious, it made the domain of sky and sea gained by the Allies, and too inconsistent appeared the real possibility of recovery of a part of the armies. They were not even choose who to save and who to condemn, imprisonment, or rather those condemned to fight for others repatriation. It was time to give a bleak assignment to Army Group and the simple and bitter task to buy time to improve the defense of Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, etc. The meaning and aim of the memo were these.

Naturally such a speech could only result in a fine-tuning of the entire strategic leadership. The forecasts were oriented towards the reliability of an enemy landing in the Italian islands or in the Balkan Peninsula after the elimination of the Tunisian theater. Now, the German ally *"does not feel directly and immediately threatened by an attack on the Italian peninsula and the little import that it be put to the sword: therefore, once evacuated Tunisia do not send anything. But likely that the interests of more than the attack on the Balkan peninsula and then will send units and means."* Therefore it was necessary to prevent such behavior vigorously urging sending to Italy that already required.

Now too many chickens come home to roost. Among others, to conduct the war dependent, in practice, by the will of one of the *partners*, the strongest. Although Italy was sinking into a political chaos and military - fearful deficiencies in maritime transport, insurmountable deficiencies of materials and media of all kinds, inability to thwart enemy air offensive, impossible

to challenge a powerful attempt to land on the peninsula or in the Balkans, insufficient recovery of some ill-armed divisions, organization of operational command unresponsive - where he could still do something that really helped. Definitely:

"I think we need - Ambrosio concluded in the memo-which the above is represented and discussed frankly and without innuendo with the Ally, especially in order to establish his aid for the future, and to outline a common future strategic conduct of war, based on the present and future potential enemy and our real possibilities of struggle and internal resistance.

It is in every way to keep in mind that for our country are perhaps very next event of very serious war, which with our own strength we can not in any way prevent; we must demand ally involvement to the extent necessary and we have to get right away so it will not succeed late. Doing so will require a review of our policy"⁽⁶⁾.

Mussolini approved. All he could do. But certainly he did not smile at the prospect of a discussion of this kind with Hitler. He began with the write. The first argument-that he hastened to indicate as decisive- being Russia. He had to close the chapter on Russia at all costs, because "*Russia can not be destroyed*", as it was protected by the immensity of space. So either a compromise peace or stabilization of the front. Vacated the ground of the Soviet Union, it became possible to mass against Britain and the United States to regain the strategic initiative, which "*from autumn onwards, by land and air, is passed into the hands of the enemy*", and throw in catastrophe of the Anglo-American invasion of North Africa. How? Simple:

"a. resist in Tunisia to the extreme. And it is possible to make this strength that I have made the urgent request for a aerial reinforcement;

b. fall on the back of the Anglo-Americans through Spain and Spanish Morocco;

c. take the same time to give the Balearic Axis absolute control of the western Mediterranean. The day the first German mechanized unit comes on the rear of Gibraltar the British fleet must dislodge and can not go to Alexandria (even if we master the Strait of Sicily) (...)"

It was implied that the "*bold move*" proposal were to be performed by Germany. The move, of course, "lightning", would allow Italy to "*march (as it adamantly wants) with Germany to the end*", as the sheer strength that it was conducting against "*the pressure of two giants, plus French*" was sentenced to a close to exhaustion ⁽⁷⁾. That meant the acquiescence of Spain seems more than obvious. A few days earlier, Franco gave a speech to the Cortes* expressing sounding very doubtful about the war: in his view could last another six years and end without winners or losers. And perhaps even Mussolini wanted illusion about the Soviet Union: while overestimating the internal difficulties of this, the exhaustion of his armies, friction

*Spain's Parliament

London and Washington, could not ignore the significance of Stalingrad, the huge flow of allies supplies and the immense strain of *Wehrmacht* and the *Luftwaffe*. However, objectively, at least some attempt to right the boat had to do it. Otherwise it could only passively accept defeat.

Moreover, the insistence on whether to seek a solution to the Russian problem was not a simple obsession of Mussolini or of the Comando Supremo, but the only hope of a way out appeared to the minds of many, when operation *Torch* established itself in all its important weight. Already December 6th, 1942 Mussolini had told Goering *in camera charitatis** we had to solve the heavy Soviet commitment:

“(…) If it were possible to arrive at a second peace of Brest-Litovsk (and this is done by giving Russia compensation in Central Asia), it must be taken in such a way that it made a defensive line that destroy any enemy initiative and with minimal commitment to the forces of the Axis”⁽⁸⁾.

Goering had agreed, going even to claim that it is the ideal solution for Hitler, but of course no one dared to talk to the leader of the Third Reich. It also appears that he did the one to whom no one would have thought Ribbentrop. Convinced very soon the extraordinary seriousness of an operation that had involved the landing, it was estimated, about four million tons of shipping, he suddenly saw a very black perspective: Africa lost the Mediterranean into enemy hands and in Italy trouble. Then he went to far:

“I Am of the opinion that the Führer is in need of a significant easing for the conduct of war, and pray so that I will immediately give full powers to put me in communication with Stalin, through Mrs. Kollontay, Soviet ambassador in Stockholm, in order to conclude the peace, and that, if necessary, against the renunciation of most of the territories conquered in the East.

At my mention of a waiver of the eastern territories, the Führer reacted immediately in violent form. Jumped up, his face red, interrupted me and told me with unprecedented violence that wanted to talk to me only on Africa and nothing else. The shape of his unblemished by the time I made impossible a repetition of my proposal”⁽⁹⁾.

Apart from this attempt, we do not know how far more truthful and never renewed, quickly it took hold in German circles and the allies of the axis the cautious hope that Mussolini could play the historic role of savior ... of the war. The only one who could persuade Hitler was unanimously considered Mussolini. But this was no longer the man of Monaco. Not only he had aged, sick and tired, he was already defeated.

The satellite countries, especially after the disaster of Stalingrad, were in full crisis of rethinking on the German strategy. Romania was the most worried and he had good reason: in one battle

*Latin= reprimand done in a secret

of the Don, in January, had suffered 280,000 casualties. According to Alfieri, then, even in Germany emerged a certain excitement. On March 21, in a personal note to the Duce, he described the keen interest shown in the Berliners environment responsible paragraph concerning the war on the Russian front contained in the above letter of 8 March Mussolini. Alfieri poses highlight is the satisfaction of many politicians is the resistance of the German generals, and urged in no uncertain terms Mussolini talking to Hitler one on one "*with absolute clarity and precision*" to be released "*from the Soviet sphinx that totally dominates his thinking*" and to convince him to give up the idea of a new summer offensive. The *Wehrmacht* was not strong enough to not have to consider the possibility of a failure of unpredictable consequences and the Red Army was not enough to overcome the resistance of a strong German defensive position. So if Führer had been persuaded to accept a situation of strategic stability in the east, it would be possible to act in concentrated forces in the Mediterranean⁽¹⁰⁾.

Regardless of the assessment of the military problem in general is good now clarify the various points of view on the Tunisian theater -of Mussolini and the Comando Supremo, Hitler and the OKW, Kesselring and von Arnim -to explain friction that can succeed sometimes incomprehensible. All, without exception, they considered Tunisia as lost in the more or less near future. And right on the deadline differences surfaced. Mussolini ranged from realistic visions of war and undermined the illusion of a solution to the East, fear (for himself) of the chasm that opened and hope to find a way out, the decision to deal with Hitler and awareness of not finding the strength. In such a mood he was persuading you get enough to autumn (!): The arrangement of the Russian front and/or Spanish would enable it to provide support in some way. Ambrosio, however, was already thinking about the after-Tunisia in terms of defense of Italy and in much the same vein, although in terms of concern for the future behavior of Italian, had entered the OKW. Who was fighting like a lion but was Kesselring, knowing his professional capacity, it is difficult to understand on what rested optimism that filled him to the bitter end. Maybe it was sheer determination to fight as long as possible. Von Arnim, finally, he was fully aligned to bitterness and mistrust of Rommel: he tried to do his best, persuaded of the inevitability of an end with great strides.

It is not enough. Ambrosio had hit the real problem and in the simplest terms: should lay men and equipment into the Tunisian furnace or renounce to fuel the resistance? No one spoke explicitly. And, oddly enough given his character, Ambrosio did not urge a formal decision by Mussolini or

of the OKW. Indeed, the choice of one side was silent, the other had to be entrusted to the joint conduct of the war so strongly and harshly request to the ally. The tacit choice was made by both sides: the Comando Supremo tried to send the ready from Italy, knowing that would have been a result well above the bleak forecasts; OKW decided against starting the units waiting for boarding in Italy and then turn off the taps ⁽¹¹⁾.

Ultimately, everyone agreed on the practical level in overseas shipping, as determined, in proclaiming the intentions of the fiercest resistance to the bitter end, and in the hope that the Army Group of Africa would rule for some time yet. How much? One that would allow the enemy.

However, he had to give an address to von Arnim and this address was to have a very real basis. Ambrosio then wrote:

“Follows 30906 of the 17th current can confirm that the southern front ⁽¹²⁾ must be fiercely defended. However the threat is looming on the right and on the rear of the 1st Army may also impose withdraw to the Chott line to avoid total annihilation of the 1st Army.

Unnecessary to consider the withdrawal into *Jebel Mansour-Enfidaville* line, which goes wisely prepared organization. Withdrawal from *Chott* to the new *Jebel Mansour-Enfidaville* should be undertaken with defense maneuvered in the plain-Sfax Kairouan & protected by resistance troops now in place to protect the Western Front from *Jebel Mansour* south. Of these troops must be properly adjusted the subsequent withdraw.

The new *Jebel Mansour-Enfidaville* agree right now to fix security safeguards.

The proposed withdraw from the *Chott* line must be made to this Comando Supremo, which reserves to decide, unless the precipitate events generates the need for immediate decision to avoid the destruction of the 1st Army. In this case the Commander of the Army Group is free to decide, immediately informing this Comando Supremo.

Superaereo, according to OBS, immediately examine the situation resulting, in order to ensure the effective help of the aviation in the new situation and to provide for timely evictions and without use of the airfields.

For the possibility of withdraw above, is prepared without use of ports”⁽¹³⁾.

Although compiled immediately, these directives were sent overseas on the 27th and subject, because he wanted to await the return of Kesselring from a further visit in Tunisia. The recipient of the document was Gen. Mattioli, who must sign and date it and return it only after a precise telegraphic order of the Comando Supremo.

On the afternoon of the 28th, just back, Kesselring saw Ambrosio and presented an optimistic view: Messe had expressed "*satisfaction*" for the success of the retreat to the line *Chotts -Akarit*; The line in question was "*very good*" and in the west had "*a good flanking position*"; von Arnim and Messe considered the chief operation ended as made promptly; to Maknassy not warned of

a particular hazard, and any enemy attempt on Fondouk had been repulsed. All told him, Kesselring, did not believe that for the moment he should send the guidelines contemplating the possibility to retreat to Enfidaville.

Ambrosio said that "*on the basis of the latest news directives will not be made on departure. General von Arnim already know the intention of Rommel before his departure and so for now it is best to wait*"⁽¹⁴⁾. Then the conversation moved on supplies and Kesselring asked insistently to resume the transport of personnel with destroyers, having to immediately send 8,000 men and then another 10,000. The Adm. Girosi, present at the conversation, intervened he had just nine destroyers efficient and he could not run the risk of further losses.

Supermarina had just expressed in black and white, their thoughts on the question of troop transport. A first letter was the 27th:

"It is no longer possible to use the few remaining destroyers in other missions to transport troops, which inevitably would cause new losses. It should also reduce the activity of laying mines. Every effort will be made to restore the efficiency of destroyers heavily damaged, currently in repair, in order to be able as soon as possible also have nine ships for the accompaniment, the minimum necessary, of the three *Vittorio Veneto* type battleships.

The troop will be resumed with the former French destroyer: the first two will be online within three weeks, the another two will follow in a short interval [instead these destroyers could not be promptly prepared]. "

The second letter was just in that same March 28:

"It is not advisable, from every point of view, to insist on carrying troops to Tunisia by sea (...). The probability of passage every day more limited. The risk is still acceptable for the material, but not for men. Each troop carrier sunk in material effects corresponds to a lost battle and has repercussions even more serious in the moral field. In the current situation all the maritime transport of troops to Tunisia should be entrusted to the air (...)"

All this was reiterated in the meeting between Ambrosio and Kesselring and the conversation ended with the following exchange of views:

"Kesselring: then Tunisia will be lost, the fleet will not help in anything.

Ambrosio: states can not accept this concept. On the contrary, will be then that will be necessary the fleet.

Kesselring: Duce would like to represent the need to resume the transport with destroyers.

Ambrosio: the Duce can not change the situation; further use of destroyers is impossible. We call on all the S.84 and bring with them the personal.

Kesselring: insists on going to the Duce essentially in order to report, since he is subject directly to him, and what to put in place his responsibility.

Ambrosio: he realizes the opportunity that Marshal Kesselring safeguard his responsibilities with the OKW and ask the Duce when want to receive him" ⁽¹⁵⁾.

The difference in behavior between Ambrosio and Cavallero is glaring. It was the next day, March 29, at 12:45, that Mussolini received Ambrosio and Kesselring. These informed immediately reinforcements aircraft decided by Hitler for the OBS (a group of fighter FW 190, one of Me 110 destroyers and with a Ju 88 bomber) and the agreements made with Fougier for training of pilots and Italians crews of German aircraft, then passed to Tunisia. Just the day before the enemy had worked intensively on the west, with resulting adjustments line. In the sector of Manteuffel had been practically lost two Bersaglieri battalions and sectors of Maknassy and El Guettar had detected infiltrations. Nevertheless, the tactical situation could be considered satisfactory. Another discussion on supplies. Eight days they came to Africa neither convoys nor individual ships due to bad weather, so that all planes available were used for the transport of ammunition and fuel, in order to overcome the least worst of the crisis. But the serious problem of personnel demanded a solution. By air it could have been to send 1,500 men a day, but as I said it was necessary to prioritize essential supplies. Then it puts the case to review the transport of personnel with the destroyers.

Mussolini repeated the arguments of Admiral Riccardi: *"If these predictions [Allied landings in Sicily, Sardinia or Greece] were to happen, we can not avoid a battle and we must, no matter what happens, use fully our battleships. To do this it is essential to have provision of the minimum number of destroyers that can ensure the protection of the fleet."* Basically, for the personnel there remained only the solution by air.

In closing the interview, the Duce returned his attention on Tunisia, pointing to the possibility of a retreat from the *Chotts -Akarit* line to avoid loss of the 1st Army. Kesselring, unfavorable to this extent, at first objected that *"a further shortening of the lines would make smaller still our beachhead, and this perhaps would not allow more than in Tunisia. Each of our withdrawal, narrowing the bridgehead, the enemy always has a better chance."* However, he said, carrying ammunition and fuel to Africa the situation is definitely improved⁽¹⁶⁾.

While the meeting was in progress at the Palazzo Venezia, Gen. Westphal phoned Gen. Gandin to send an urgent message received by von Arnim:

"The development of the situation requires an urgent meeting with his Excellency Ambrosio at the Headquarters of Army Group. Please also say to make known when he is scheduled to arrive"⁽¹⁷⁾.

In the afternoon Ambrosio made contact again with Kesselring, he explained that he could not refrain and warned him that, to the point where they seemed have reached now, was intended to proceed with the delivery of the directive notes. Kesselring, who feared to meet von Arnim in the "*mentality of retreat*" - the same one he had tried to remove from the head of Rommel - observed that the psychological repercussions of those directives could be dangerous and suggested instead a draft prepared by Westphal:

"In relation to the development of the situation, add the following commands to those in the sheet ... Army Group Africa has the task of defending the position of Chotts. A breakthrough of the west front must be avoided by all means and for this purpose it is necessary to devote sufficient reserves.

Be avoided by all means the risk of breakage in Maknassy-El Guettar, running counter attacks with all the armored units available, as soon as have arrived supplies.

If, despite all efforts, the current front could not be maintained and it should prove inevitable rupture of the front by the enemy, the Army Group may withdraw, step by step, to the position of Enfidaville, after asking permission to this Comando Supremo (...)"

Ambrosio replied coldly that the German formulation showed no new elements, but merely drew attention to the sector of the *Centauro*. However he was anxious that von Arnim had the right to break away if circumstances became compromising for the fate of the 1st Army. Then Kesselring played the card of the order of Hitler:

"Kesselring: the Führer had said that the line of Chott had to be considered as the last position.

Ambrosio: I understand that the Marshal give particular importance to what the Führer said. These are my directions, however, already been submitted to the Duce, who ordered me to send them certainly. I waited until now only out of respect to Marshal Kesselring.

Kesselring: I was still opposed to issue directives to not give von Arnim the concept of withdraw, while it is still necessary to deal a blow to the enemy.

Ambrosio on the other hand is the same von Arnim touting orders, which do you mean that you need a certain freedom of action in the event that the situation deteriorates," ⁽¹⁸⁾.

Now Kesselring did not remain that propose sending Westphal to illustrate the intentions of Ambrosio to von Arnim and, above all, insist on the need to counter attack with armored formations on the enemy's flank. Ambrosio did not object, and so on March 30 Westphal rushed by air to Tunisia.

April 1st, Kesselring went to the Comando Supremo. He was accompanied by Gen. Westphal and by the Adm. Ruge, both with something to say. Westphal reported on his mission: he explained that the current positions were to be held "*to avoid at all costs a breakthrough*" and that their abandonment could be started "*only when*

may experience a breakthrough that has operational development". Von Arnim, he added, not discerned the existence of an "*acute danger*" on the western front, also because most likely opponent was designed simply to commit our forces to wear down the reserves and to force us to a wasteful consumption of ammunition. In the sensitive area of Maknassy - El Guettar the situation presented itself yet clear, however, it seemed, the Americans had shifted the center of gravity of the attack on El Guettar.

Kesselring took the floor in turn: the 1st Army appeared now very weakened - about a third of the force, Ambrosio nodded - however von Arnim intended to resist in place "*until five minutes before 12:00*", according to text expression. There was to be feared that to strengthen the sector of El Guettar is too weakened to that of Akarit, so he thought it was appropriate to announce the sending of organic units and accessories by air. Then he expose by Adm. Ruge a proposed new mined field the Strait of Sicily, a project the Supermarina was already informed. Ambrosio agreed on the usefulness of the measure, especially given the poor consistency of coastal defenses, and assured that he would talk to Riccardi. "*I just think to - he admitted through clenched teeth - this would have to be done first*" ⁽¹⁹⁾.

But the main topic was another. That morning had received a telegram from von Arnim to the Comando Supremo, through the OBS:

"The Execution of the new directives regarding the conduct of operations is possible only if they arrived by 6 April 10,000 tons of ammunition and 8,000 cubic meters [= 6,400 tons] of fuel in North Africa, of which amount a quarter by 2 April. The needs for the Italian troops not included in the above data. Please tell me what needs to be done if this condition is not achieved" ⁽²⁰⁾.

The Comando Supremo had immediately responded that, including landings of 31 March and 1 April as well as those provided in the day, before the first deadline the Army Group would receive 2,450 tons ammunition and 3,700 fuel within the second another 2,450 tons. ammunition and 3,700 fuel; not including transport by air. By 12 April had planned a convoy with additional 3,500 tons ammunition and 6,000 fuel. In total it was 10,000 tons ammunition and 16,000 fuel for the Italians and Germans. "*More than that is impossible to do,*" he warned. The question was just touched in the interview. Ambrosio considered excessive the amount of ammunition and asked inappropriate "*given the rank of General von Arnim, the request for orders with which ends on [his] message.*" Kesselring agreed on both points and observed that "*probably when he dictated those messages [= von Arnim] was worried because he had the impression that the materials did not come*" ⁽²¹⁾.

The same evening, at 20:15, Kesselring went to Palazzo Venezia. There is no denying the will - if not the deep conviction – of the Field Marshal

to show a rosy situation. He repeats that El Guettar the crisis was considered outdated due to recent night bombing by units of the 2nd *Luftflotte*, landing of 20-25 tanks, seven *Tiger*, with the landing craft and air transport Italians and Germans. And he ensured that the deployment on Akarit was good: the line of the 1st Army, running on the hills, dominating the plain below; positions, enjoying the natural protection provided by the river and the soft ground, were not easily defendable; the enemy, being in the plains and not possessing good observers, could not effectively use their artillery.

Mussolini asked about the morale of the troops and Kesselring reassured him again recently was still high and the next day he went in person "*to persuade the commanders to be stronger than you believe*" ⁽²²⁾.

Kesselring just could not accept the idea of reducing the bridgehead to Enfidaville. On the 5th, back to Rome, reiterated the need to preserve the positions of *Chotts* and Akarit and to send more troops, especially in Germans, Mussolini, that many illusions if it anymore, wondered if it was just a case of excessive optimism, but Kesselring said bluntly that if commands and troops intended to resist and if the Comando Supremo and the OBS fed augmented the forces, the line was storable. The Duce was held on generic and Kesselring, the next day, he returned to the subject with Ambrosio.

The Chief of the G.S. General then took position against Rommel: If you had come so early to Akarit, this had depended on the missing resistance of Rommel before the 8th Army, against the advice of the Italian general. "*I can not forget - he said bitterly - that if Rommel had been at the time restrained, we would still be in Tobruk*" and reminded his interlocutor that a date was set on which to stop for initiating the operation Malta. Then he continued: "*Basically in this long retreat of 2000 km we began to resist when Rommel disappeared.*" Kesselring, who evidently did not expect this harsh criticism, criticism which also shared in full, ended up hiding behind a no comment, perceiving the thought of Hitler about it.

Ambrosio had not touched the subject at hand. He was leaving for Salzburg and intended to support before the OKW and the Führer was inappropriate to a return of Rommel in command of the Army Group Africa. But also he wanted to persuade Kesselring not at all hostile to serious resistance on Akarit - incidentally, the withdraw to be carried out in plain appeared full of unknowns for the 1st Army, as it was vehicle poor -without of course compromising the security of Messe's troops.

Kesselring tried to renew the request for use of destroyers for personal transport. Ambrosio replied coldly: "*It is necessary that the Marshal is convinced that not only Tunisia, but also Italy is in danger. Sardinia, then, is also threatened*"

regardless of the fall of Tunisia". Then Kesselring moved the discourse on the Navy, complaining basically a lack of cooperation from the Italian side.

The issue was complex and it is worth to summarize the salient aspects. The appointment of Admiral. Doenitz as commander in chief of the *Kriegsmarine* had marked a change in policy rather showy hitherto followed in respect of the Royal Marina ⁽²³⁾. Without making much mystery Doenitz intended to exercise decisive influence on the direction of naval operations and the protection of overseas traffic, especially when the Adm. Ruge, sent to Italy to direct a German service for the protection of convoys, signaled the "*deficiency of education and tactical ballistics*" found in the Italian crews and recommended the establishment of a Joint Naval Command responsible for the Naples-Sicily-Tunisia sector.

On March 15, after convincing, without effort, Hitler that the Royal Marina had to make the maximum effort - that had to engage seriously - or risk losing the Tunisia, Doenitz was received in Rome by Mussolini. Briefly explained the main lines of an agreement for cooperation between the two navies of the Axis and received approval in principle, given the favorable opinion of Riccardi, who attended the conversation. Except that, in the meeting the next day, Doenitz read an "*Agreement between the Italian Navy and the German Navy*" not brought to the attention of the *Supermarina*, and Riccardi with out being obstinate.

The document, as claimed by Ambrosio, provided for the establishment of "*a comprehensive network of representatives to the Germanic land Commands and Italian naval, to contribute their experience to the best performance of the commands and the means, but in reality to take full control our organization's operations.*" Hence derived: clear opposition by Riccardi, accusations of unwillingness to cooperation with Doenitz, and finally a compromise agreement. A compromise that welcomed most of the proposals and wishes Germans, but not left entirely in German hands the direction of training and monitoring of convoys.

Abandoned the idea of including the German Naval Command in Italy as part of *Supermarina* Doenitz was content to get onto a Germanic Traffic Protection Office, headed by Ruge and dependent on the *Seekriegsleitung*, distinct from the German Navy Command in Italy ⁽²⁴⁾. Regardless of the friction that soon originated between the two bodies for mutual German interference, all the success claimed by Doenitz to Hitler on his return to Germany resulted in an agreement more quickly than convinced by *Supermarina*. Just contrasts which soon occurred between *Supermarina* and the German General Staff incorporated in it he referred to Kesselring. Ambrosio did fold:

"I do not personally know your Navy officer but I think he knows perfectly his duties, since in mixed commands must maintain a continuous spirit of cooperation, which is the one that exists between me and you. Now, I can not admit that the requests they made in the form of imposition of will and it is precisely for this form that your officer met resistance" ⁽²⁵⁾.

The conference of Klessheim (7-10 April) was in Italian hopes, and not only Italian, a turning point. Too many things had happened. Indeed, too many disappointments. It was necessary to recognize the brutal reality of reverses perhaps decisive: El Alamein, operation *Torch*, Stalingrad had delivered into the hands of the enemy the strategic initiative everywhere. The elimination from Africa, the opening of a second front in Europe, a tremendous third winter in Russia, all things considered first with irony, now loomed ominously next. And if Romania watched with horror to the east, Italy saw the war come - that war that Mussolini had so long tried not for Italian people to "*feel*" - at its shores. Germany was aware of the need to help Italy, but he also knew that he could do so only at the expense of the Russian front, and Hitler seemed adamant on this point. Maybe a person just kept so much influence on him by persuading him: Mussolini. Not for nothing on April 4, the eve of departure, the Hungarian Prime Minister, Kallay, visiting Rome, implored the Duce to "*immediately take some initiative to end the conflict and assured in advance the full support of his government to Italy believed any actions necessary for their salvation*" ⁽²⁶⁾.

Mussolini showed no opposition to the speech, but merely to promise a general intervention with the Führer, at least for the Russian problem. A separate peace for Italy and the satellites countries for the moment there was not even to think about, considering the theme of "*unconditional surrender*" waved by the Allies. In due course, however, the issue could be reconsidered: "*If the fall does not bring us victory, then - but only then - can we consider your ideas. But I'm ready to say already now that I accept the Your point of view as worthy of consideration*" ⁽²⁷⁾.

Bastianini was part of the delegation, Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs (the department had been taken personally by Mussolini), and Ambrosio, each with its own experts. You can take it for certain intention of Mussolini to speak out with Hitler ⁽²⁸⁾, however, who went down to the station of the castle Klessheim near Salzburg, he was not clearly in the best of conditions. "*Pale, gaunt cheeks, his face dominated by large, dark eyes, a man aged and dejected greeted his German colleague,*" so painted the Col. Dollmann who accompanied him as an interpreter. ⁽²⁹⁾ Worse: during the entire period Mussolini was almost always isolated, meeting once or twice a day, face to face, with Hitler for the expected talks.

The Comando Supremo had prepared a large memorandum about the issues to be addressed at different levels⁽³⁰⁾. We will limit ourselves to two topics: the strategic leadership and the theater of operations in Tunisia.

Regarding the first, the thought of Ambrosio was developed as follows:

The vision and conduct unified policy and operations are elements of paramount importance, for the victory in the war coalition.

The cornerstones of the conduct mentioned unit should be established by *mutual agreement* between the Axis partners, because only the realistic view of *common* resources and possibilities and the general situation and our enemy, makes it possible to establish general rules for the defense of the southern front of Europe and the relative function of the various theaters of war; consequently, you can draw the lines of the future joint conduct of the war.

On the other hand, it is unacceptable that in a struggle in which our country is *directly and seriously* threatened, the general conduct of the war is defined with *unilateral* view.

According to the Italian point of view, the strategic guidelines for the future conduct of the war, for the case of Axis, so you can draw.

The move, the coalition opposing the initiative of operations on all operational fronts, except in the field of submarine warfare, and the overwhelming air superiority -which allows the enemy to maintain the productive capacity of the Axis war to a rather low level, and to threaten the morale of the people - *impose reduce operating fields* to focus efforts against the most dangerous enemy - England -up to its annihilation.

Consequently, it is necessary to solve the Russian problem as soon as possible, or by means of a *compromise peace*, which gives sufficient guarantees (albeit at the cost of significant temporary *concessions*), or *stabilizing* the Eastern Front, in order to recover the greatest possible amount of forces.

We must also avoid - by all means - the entry of Turkey into the war against the Axis; to achieve this, any concession appear justified at this time.

We should finally try to take out the enemy the initiative of operations, which, for now, is still polarized in Tunisia. Therefore, if possible with the consent and concurrence of Spain, must threaten and force the port of Gibraltar, acting through the Iberian territory.

Meanwhile, what will be the next target of the adversaries? It can be assumed that the enemy, before taking new strategic initiatives, will try to solve the problem Tunisian who commits him too strongly.

Conquered Tunisia, enemy action could be resolved or against Italy or against the Balkan Peninsula. As things are missing crucial elements in favor of either hypothesis. Germany is naturally inclined to give greater weight to the defense of the Balkans, which could reach most direct offenses of strategic (access to the Danube basin) and economical (oils Romanian). But, you need to consider that the defense of Italy, in addition to affecting *directly* even Germany, is very valuable indirect contribution to the defense of the Balkans, is constraining forces areas in Tunisia, is allowing traffic control enemy through the Strait of Sicily.

There is no doubt that, within the general framework of the war, control, really effective, the Sicilian channel element is of exceptional importance: you can certainly say that, without the way of the Sicilian Channel, hardly the enemy can give, with good probability of success, his final attack Europe. It is therefore necessary that the ally *ensures* the competition (mainly materials) to us essential to ensure the defense of Italy, and strengthens the current aerial involvement, so that-even in the event of loss of the Tunisia-both equally assured,

from Sicily and Sardinia, the continuous and effective control of the Strait of Sicily.

Possession of Tunisia appears still, however, the *most effective means* to ensure the defense of Italy direct and indirect Balkans. It is necessary, therefore, to *keep* at all costs in this theater and what can now be implemented in the South focusing numerous air forces to neutralize the enemy air and naval bases."

On the issue of Tunisia, of the overall situation and the severe imbalance of forces especially in armored vehicles and aircraft ⁽³¹⁾ created the conditions for a sudden collapse and urgent remedies imposed, namely German reinforcements. If they had been granted, the resistance would have been possible and the beachhead preserved longer. As for the personnel, in April it was expected to transfer overseas 13,000 Germans and 20,000 Italians between complement and organic units ready for boarding in Italy.

Then it was necessary to define the position of Rommel, who on paper was still the owner of the commander of the Army Group. The memo contained a hard - and frankly ungenerous - indictment against Field Marshal and find an explanation in the absolute conviction that his physical and mental condition does not allow him to regain control and the firm intention of not wanting him anymore in Tunisia. Conviction and purpose, moreover, also shared by the Germans.

At Klessheim saw clearly the gap that now divided politicians, diplomats and military the Italian leadership from of the Third Reich. Mussolini got nothing he hoped in the political-strategic also because, as stated von Rintelen and Dollmann, present both in the conference -in frequent conversations with Hitler in private, without witnesses and without interpreters, was in difficulty because of his imperfect knowledge of German. The proposal for a compromise peace or stabilization of the front with the Soviet Union fell under a blunt refusal of the Führer. On part of the Germanic people he lived in unreality. Many, in a separate, trusted in some foreign trust their concerns and their anxieties. Even Goebbels wrote in his diary:

"No one can imagine in what way the war will end and how we win. All they care about the offensive of summer upon which many hopes. Rumor has it that we could not resist a third winter of the war, if we fail to defeat the Red Army during the summer". ⁽³²⁾

Keitel repeated the reverie of his head on the offensive resumed in Russia. Doenitz swore on the success of his submarine warfare. Ribbentrop interceded for support, but when *"after having vented to describe the bloody irreparable losses suffered by the Russian army, had heard Ambrosio impassive respond with a cold 'hopefully good' amazement knew no limits"* ⁽³³⁾.

The other major issue concerned the disastrous Italian military situation and the threat of an Allied landing in Sicily and Sardinia. According to the Germans - It seemed clear - the problems of the Mediterranean they belonged to a theater of operations of secondary importance. They saw the need to keep at any cost Tunisia, but in order to tie down the enemy as long as possible. A landing in Sicily or Sardinia was feared, but in the end it was not at the gates of Germany.

Hitler sought to reassure the obvious concerns of Mussolini, saying that there would be no invasion of Sicily.

"Duce, I guarantee -promise boldly - that Africa will be the defended. The situation is serious but not desperate. I recently read the story of the siege of Verdun in World War I; Verdun successfully resisted the attacks of the best German regiments. I do not see why this should not happen in Africa. With your support, Duce, my troops will make Tunis the Verdun of the Mediterranean" ⁽³⁴⁾.

Mussolini remembered Dollmann, nodded politely, while the other Italian and German officials paled.

There was also a political point that was dear to Mussolini. It was a "European", which is a statement of the Powers of the Axis on the rights of small European nations, on the principle of nationality and self-determination of peoples. A project rather confused, that the intention, was to act as a counterpart to the Atlantic Charter. He found willing ears, especially in Ribbentrop -who did not intend to change the policy towards the countries he conquered, much less, to facilitate a spontaneous coalition of satellite states as part of the Tripartite (especially if led by Italy) -indeed "*he was regarded by the Germans as a pleasant Italian found not to be taken seriously*" ⁽³⁵⁾.

On balance, Mussolini does not gather successes. Obtained confirmation of von Arnim and some promise of help and that was all. But the hints made by Bastianini to the internal Italian situation ⁽³⁶⁾ and the attitude of Ambrosio struck unpleasantly Germanic representatives. Dollmann himself remarked and later commented:

"Thanks to General Ambrosio (...) the Germans could at least know the episode of an Italian commander who did not hesitate even before the Führer, Duce, Ribbentrop and the entire headquarters of Hitler to defend the interests of his country, urging and provoking such decision" ⁽³⁷⁾.

The suspicion grew when Hitler was soon way to find other allies in the desire to find a political solution to the war. On the 12th received Gen. Antonescu, Romanian Prime Minister, and the 16th Adm. Horthy, regent of Hungary, who, even without being dramatic, they understand with difficulties to support the growing weight of war.

Back in Italy, Mussolini told Vittorio Emanuele III had found "*a lot of confusion*" by Hitler, to have had promises of support in aircraft and tanks for Sicily and obtained the repatriation of the II Corps, that the remains of the ARMIR. Ambrosio, received by the King on April 16, as told by Gen. Puntoni:

"The agreements of Salzburg are not getting them anywhere. Germany *only* think about *his* war and not the interests of Italy that are now decisively compromised (...). Only the repatriation of the II Corps from Russia, there was not too much discussion, but the formula devised for the return of our units seems somewhat ambiguous. It is discussed that is of a "re-ordering to be carried out in Italy rather than in Germany". Basically, I do not agree with the euphoria of the Duce. We did not have anything and we have nothing " ⁽³⁸⁾.

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From the other side by the time it came to complete the logistical apparatus in French North Africa, to develop the two armies of Alexander, to improve the organization of air and naval forces in the Mediterranean. The mighty war machine was strengthening visibly, thanks to the river of supplies from the United States and Great Britain ⁽³⁹⁾. And this river began to flow better and better since the end of March, when it started operating the unified command in the Atlantic, until then controlled separately in areas of mutual interest. The Admiralties English and Canadian assumed responsibility for convoys en route across the North Atlantic and the Admiralty of the US American convoys en route to and from North Africa. This different setting and the contemporary "way" to the new system of mobile *support groups* for the hunting and the destruction of *U-boat* suddenly capsized the game waged with so much hope and so considerable initial success by Doenitz. In April, the Allied losses will fall by 50% while those of the *U-boat* double.

Operations on which mainly focused the attention of Allied leaders were the most immediate: *Vulcan* (the conquest of Tunisia) and *Husky* (the landing in Sicily and the conquest of the island). Both were under the arrows of a bitter letter from Stalin on March 18, which objected to Churchill that the campaign in Africa not only had not been accelerated, but, on the contrary, proves postponed to the end of April. So, while the Red Army was engaged in a gigantic effort against Germany, the Western Allies were left with our arms folded. The opening of the second front -*Husky* could not replace a landing in France-it was promised no later than the spring of 1943 and absolutely should not be postponed. Then in closing the letter, Stalin had dropped an ominous: "*I recognize the difficulties of the Anglo-American operations in Europe. However, I consider it my duty to warn you, as*

as still as possible, which would be extremely dangerous, from our point of view of the common cause, a further delay in the opening of a second front in France" ⁽⁴⁰⁾.

Churchill went above and beyond. One of the keys of which was regularly beating levels of armed force. In mid-March he asked the Air Mar. Portal, Chief of Staff Air Force, news about the destination of 95 heavy bombers, a record, delivered by British industries to the Royal Air Force in the week: *"Starting from a concrete example like this, you would get to find out why the production rises faster than the number our bomber squadrons."* And on April 6, he learned that the battalions of the Axis in Tunisia supposedly amounted to 141, will target Gen. Brooke, increasingly polemical: *"It seems strange that the enemy with 225,000 men to have a number of battalions almost equal to us, that we rely effectively on about three times higher"* ⁽⁴¹⁾.

Apart from that, the following memorandum sent on April 2 to Gen. Ismay for the Committee of Chiefs of the G.S. effectively outlines the Allied strategic landscape:

- “1. We make the following assumptions: first, that operation *Vulcan* is completed by the end of April, or at worst by May 15, and that no organized German or Italian military units able to save themselves; second, that operation *Husky* to take place on July 10; third, that are not in Sicily more than five Italian divisions, with no more than 50,000 fighters, and no more than two German divisions, for another 20,000 fighters, ie a total of 70,000 combatants, and also that you are able to land seven or eight divisions between British and American, with 15,000 combatants each, for a total of 105,000 combatants, and to send reinforcements to another 30,000 British soldiers, we would raise our total to 135,000 men; fourth, that it is able to win in heavy fighting that the landing will result. How long you think it will take to liquidate the enemy armed forces in Sicily?
2. In an operation of this kind all depends on the outcome of the opening battle, which will last perhaps a week, after which it can be assumed that the bulk of the enemy troops will be annihilated, captured or missing in the mountains. The distances are not great and land resources are scarce; why, once masters of ports and airports, we should actually dominate the whole of Sicily and be able to disperse with the use of aviation, and the fleet under the protection of the air, all the enemies attempts to win her back.
3. To date, the conquest of Sicily has been regarded as an end in itself. But no one should settle for a goal so modest and rather negligible for the campaign of 1943, given the size of our forces. Sicily is only a stepping stone, and we must now begin to think about how to exploit the local success. What has been done about it? You should examine all possible alternatives. Now that the operation *Anakim* (against Rangoon) is no longer present for deficiency tonnage, Mediterranean operations acquire absolute preeminence. If we expect to be masters of Sicily by the end of July, what other steps can we take? Of course, our choice is a function of what the enemy will do. In the event that large German forces are transferred in Italy (and the morale and will to fight the Italians will result consequently increased), it may be that there is not possible to concentrate

the drives needed to conquer Rome and Naples. In this case we have prepared other plans for the Eastern Mediterranean and exert strong pressure on Turkey to persuade it to intervene on our side. We must be ready to land in the Dodecanese and to help Turkey if the latter was in trouble.

4. If the Germans do not intervene and Italians surrender, then we could gain advantages on Italian territory since where we want. We could force Italy out of the conflict, take possession of Sardinia without a fight, liberate Corsica. All available forces, including the divisions located in Africa and not committed to the operation *Husky*, will be transferred to the north, in Italian territory, up to bring them in contact with the Germans at the Brenner Pass or along the French Riviera. To what extent were explored these possibilities?
5. Even if Italy continued to fight, and could count on some help from the German side, we should, once masters of Sicily, trying to get a foothold on both the tip and on the heel of the Italian boot. Possession of Taranto, together with that of the isthmus that dominates the extreme tip of Calabria, it would cause great advantages: the Italian fleet should decide in which sea refuge. We can not predict what situation or under what conditions it will be found after Operation *Husky*. Not repaired in the northern Adriatic before our occupation of Sicily, the presence of our aviation on the island would prevent it from doing so later and it should make do with the ports of La Spezia and Genoa. However, it must be very important to establish a bridgehead on the Dalmatian coast, so as to foment insurrection in Albania and Yugoslavia, through the supply of arms and equipment and sending possibly some commandos. I am convinced that, despite his current attitude understandably ambiguous, Mihailovich will strive with all his means against Italians as soon as we can actually help save him. It is evident that in this theater we have great prospects.
6. This document aims to promote more careful and urgent consideration to these problems and to obtain from the chief of staff for their opinion on what you can do and what you should do. I hope that this work can be carried out with the utmost speed, since the simple conquest of Sicily is an objective really insignificant to our campaign of 1943" ⁽⁴²⁾.

At the same time Churchill insisted with Ismay so that to the Chief of the G.S. they would lay quite evidently Eisenhower to the importance of preventing any conspicuous Axis evacuation by sea from Tunisia. But this was the last thought of the Axis.

2. THE BATTLE OF WADI AKARIT (April 5 to 6).

The view that von Arnim had an eye to the end of March is outlined soon. The fronts south and southwestern know the events, so it is useless to repeat them. On the very long front of the 5th Army of von Vaerst there had not been real battles, but that does not mean the absence of hard times. The device included, from the north, the Manteuffel division in Bizerte, the 334th Division in north Tunis, the *Hermann Goering* in the Pont du Fahs, the *Superga* in Sbikha, then the Benigni group blocking the pass of Djeloula , then the Fullriede group

to defend the passes of Pinchon and Fondouk el Okbi and finally the 50th Special Brigade to defend the passes of Faid and Maknassy. On the front of the sea had been set up the two coastal areas of Sousse and Ksour Essaf (sketch n. 66).

The intermingling of units was general and almost everywhere the defense of the positions was given to a Italian-German tactical grouping. Shortages of troops involved, also, frequent alterations and displacements of units. In principle, the operational activity was limited to an exploration aggressive on both sides, but in two sections were recording something much more substantial.

It was clear that the Allies would be at least some demonstrative action to coincide with the pressure exerted by the 8th Army. In those days, in fact, almost simultaneously we had heavy fighting in the far north, in Manteuffel, and the center, in Fullriede. The first was started on March 27 and had severely shaken the Barenthin regiment and the 10th Bersaglieri⁽⁴³⁾, causing the retreat of the front of more than thirty kilometers. The second, against the southern flank of Fondouk, was practically bankrupt immediately and was wearing thin.

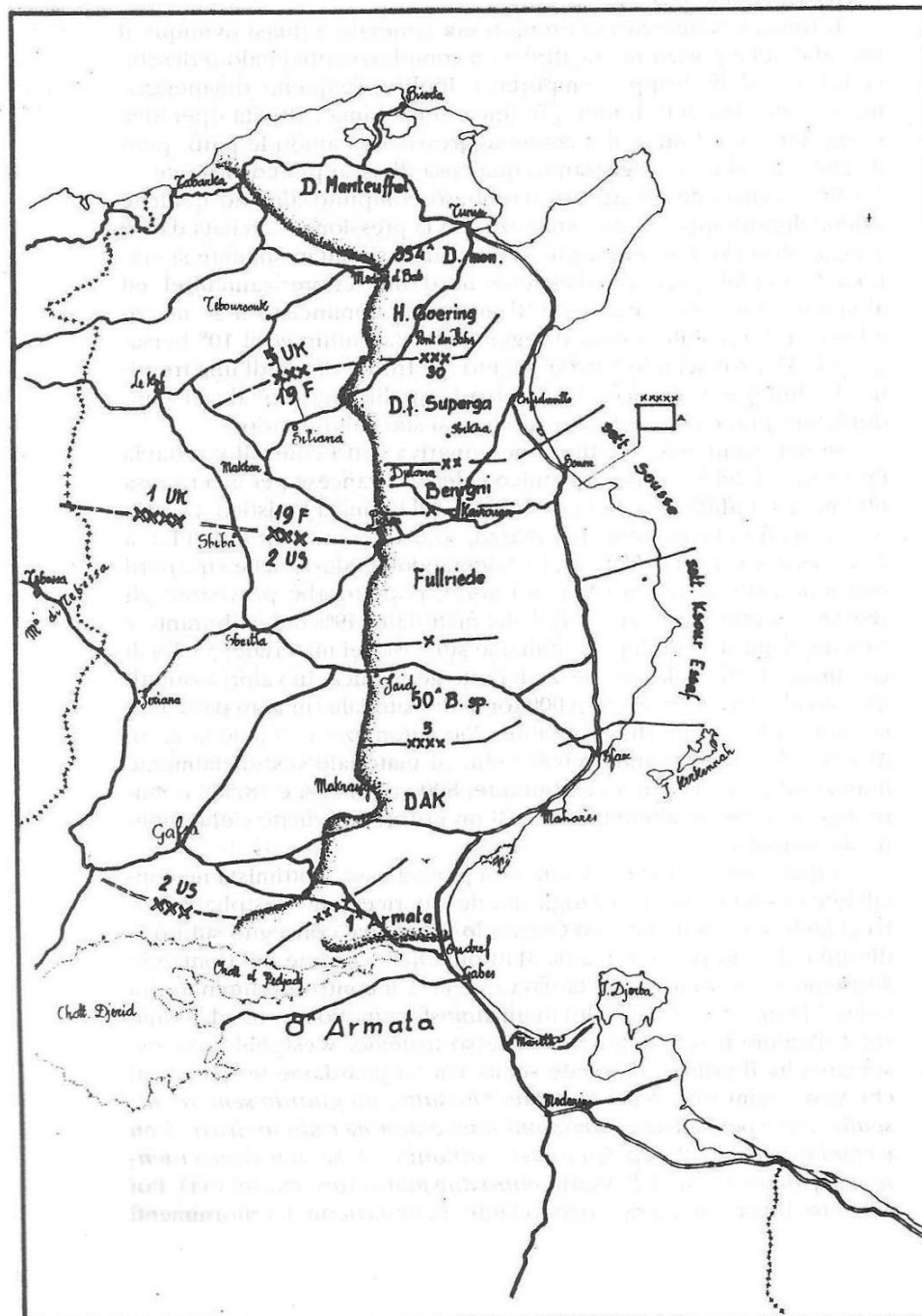
If overall the situation was under control, but the preparations for the British 5th Corp. and French 19th for a renew its refined offensive. Not to mention the logistics drama. Of 32-34 ships scheduled for March, only 14 departed Italy, and just 9 arrived in Tunisia. Whereas, moreover, also the transport with motor barges, KT boats and aircraft, compared with forecasts landings had bypassed the 48% of the material, 49% fuel and 34% of the vehicles for the Italians; on 55% of the material, 35.5% fuel and 108% of vehicles for the German side. In absolute terms, the Italians had received 8,000 tons of material (mostly ammunition), 4,900 tons fuel, 260 vehicles and 10,700 men. The Germans had reached 13,000 tons material (mainly ammunition), 7,200 tons fuel, 800 vehicles and 18,500 men. For a one-month supply to the Army Group it was just enough to breathe!

So the mood of von Arnim could not be optimistic nor conciliatory when, around noon of the 30th, he received Westphal in Ksiba el Medjouni, seat of his command. Westphal handed immediately to the guidelines given earlier by Mattioli, by order of the Comando Supremo there had affixed the date of 30th. The preliminary meeting between Germans seems to have played in a very serene atmosphere, as a general state of mind tense and depressed together. Westphal wanted to observe that the Army Group seemed "*you looked behind*", to which von Arnim says dryly: "*That's right, I'm always behind, but to see if ships arrive and do not see coming. It is not with optimism that load my guns (...). If you do not get anything on the new line [of Akarit] within two days I will be dead*"⁽⁴⁴⁾. Then he ended abruptly remembering the unhappy situation of supplies

The overall situation at the end of March

Schizzo n. 66

LA SITUAZIONE GENERALE A FINE MARZO



and stocks: *"We are without food and with no means, just as before was Rommel's army. The consequences are unavoidable"* ⁽⁴⁵⁾.

After the preamble with Westphal, von Arnim received in Gen. Silvio Rossi of the Comando Supremo, arrived the day before, and Mattioli. Being fresh news of bad turn taken by the fighting in El Guettar, so those events had pre-eminence. According to von Arnim, the gap between the opposing forces in that area -about three battalions with a few batteries of the Axis against three American divisions ⁽⁴⁶⁾ -not could allow a resistance beyond the evening of the 31st. He had to ultimately withdraw troops of El Guettra by thirty kilometers and, very shortly, provide for the withdrawal of the army from Akarit, whose accommodation was *"nothing special"*. Mattioli objected that if the repercussions of the events in the west had to be so serious for the 1st Army, perhaps suited groped to face them with units of the same army, brought quickly to oppose the threat. After the risk of a simultaneous attack by the 8th Army was always lower than the risk of a meltdown in El Guettar.

The speech seemed convincing and von Arnim, mitigating the foregoing, assured him that he did not give at all to fight in place as long as possible, but he was interested to know if Messe would be in conditions to deprive himself of some units without major problems. Mattioli left immediately with a Cicogna and returned with the support of Messe: there was no obstacle to the ceding of 21st *Panzer*, a Battalion of the *Luftwaffe* and the *Panzergranadiere Afrika* regimental (already almost reconstituted). So that these units were set in motion on the morning of the 31st and their arrival, though almost at the last minute, helped to restore the precarious situation in El Guettar.

Von Arnim hastened to acquaint von Vaerst, Cramer and Seidemann the fact that, with every good intention, unfortunately you could not rule out a quick decisive enemy success on the west front, which would entail an extra suddenly jolt to the rear of the 1st Army. It was therefore necessary to fix the outflow routes, to recognize the line of Enfidaville and clear on it all elements not absolutely indispensable, including artillery not be used for lack of ammunition. Mattioli finished instructing to report to Messe and the preview provisions of his visit for the next day.

That day, March 31, the Supreme Commander recorded the following communication:

"General Westphal has ensured that he has delivered to General von Arnim the new directives of the Comando Supremo for operations in Tunisia. The same General reported:

1. The situation in the Maknassy sector does not present an "acute danger";
2. there is some concern in the area of El Guettar;
3. tanks are 150 Germans were efficient; other 80 are repairable in a short time;

4. General von Arnim and his Chief of Staff, General Gause, they see the situation with confidence and are determined to keep their current positions as long as possible" ⁽⁴⁷⁾.

The message make the mistake of definitely optimistic. The comparison between the opposing forces was based on the following data:

a. West front:	5 th Army Ger.	1 st Army UK.
forces	88,000	?
battalions	58	97
artillery pieces	275	65
anti-tank guns	415	580
tanks	33	900
armored cars	40	290
b. Southern front	1 st Army It.	8 th Army UK.
forces	126,000	?
battalions	41	65
artillery pieces	310	610
anti-tank guns	348	800
tanks	60	550
armored cars	60	150

To combat aircraft, the 410 aircraft of the Axis opposed by over 2,200 of the Allies. A comparison rather daunting, although these figures were anything but precise (apart of course from the estimate of the enemy forces) while appearing in the situation of the Comando Supremo on 31 March. Suffice it to note that while in total 93 tanks were available, including 88 Germans, Westphal pointed 150 *Panzer* efficient.

On 1 April von Arnim went to see Messe. In the spirit of the directives received, examined the operating problem of the 1st Army and insisted that, since the defense had to be developed to the extreme limit to accept the British attack. Messe agreed, but wanted to point out that any retreat under pressure from the opponent would face big losses, especially due to the insufficiency of the means of transport, as demonstrated by the recent experience (the availability of trucks was approximately one-third of requirements). According to von Arnim a decision, whether to fall back immediately or wait a second attack, could be taken once rejected the brunt enemy, possibly inflicting losses; but Messe insisted - for a retreat to immediately following the first attempt, to prevent to fade away the most appropriate time. Von Arnim came to agree, of course in the hope that the west front and held that the conduct of the fighting north enable it to tap into the 5th Army for the establishment of a reserve ⁽⁴⁸⁾.

The overall profile of the maneuver in retreat saw the 1st Army

and DAK back to the North in two long parallel sectors. The first in wider coastal strip; the second inside, behind the Eastern Dorsale, from which he gradually recovered troops of XXX Corp of Sogno, that is the 50th Special Brigade, the Fullriede group, the Benigni group and *Superga* (sketch n. 67).

Apparently the first indications of von Arnim, the Command of XXX Corp would pass at the disposal, probably waiting for an assignment of coastal defense. Sogno was informed by the German liaison officer and, of course, immediately made his complaints to the Army Group through Mattioli, demanding not only to direct the retreat in their sector but also to receive a portion of the new defensive front. He had reasons to trade and von Arnim, he retained the orientation for the position to the control of the DAK, assured that the maneuver completed DAK would pass into reserve at the Pont du Fahs and Command XXX Corps, as well as maintaining the *Superga* not interested in the withdrawal, would receive the responsibility of the new sector, probably under the orders of the 1st Army.⁽⁴⁹⁾

In reporting these to Ambrosio behind the scenes, Mattioli considered dutiful highlight, at least in part, the personal action of von Arnim: "Assuming the command of Army Group in a particularly delicate moment, he was from the beginning dominated by the worry of supplies, enough to say that the success of the defense depended essentially on ammunition and fuel that would have been available. Since no new perspective opened in this area, it is not impossible that he is slowly entered the order of ideas of Rommel to seek that the final state of the operational problem in the withdrawing the line for Enfidaville. Noteworthy in this respect the fact that the current Chief of Staff of the Army Group - General Gause - is the former aide to Rommel. This could somehow explain some evaluation rather rushed and not fully objective view of the situation, as the one made on March 10, which I mentioned above. However, I believe that all the provisions given so far he has complied in spirit and letter to the directives of this Comando Supremo, as they are all inspired by the idea of defending tenaciously occupied land and to delay as long as possible the enemy advance"⁽⁵⁰⁾.

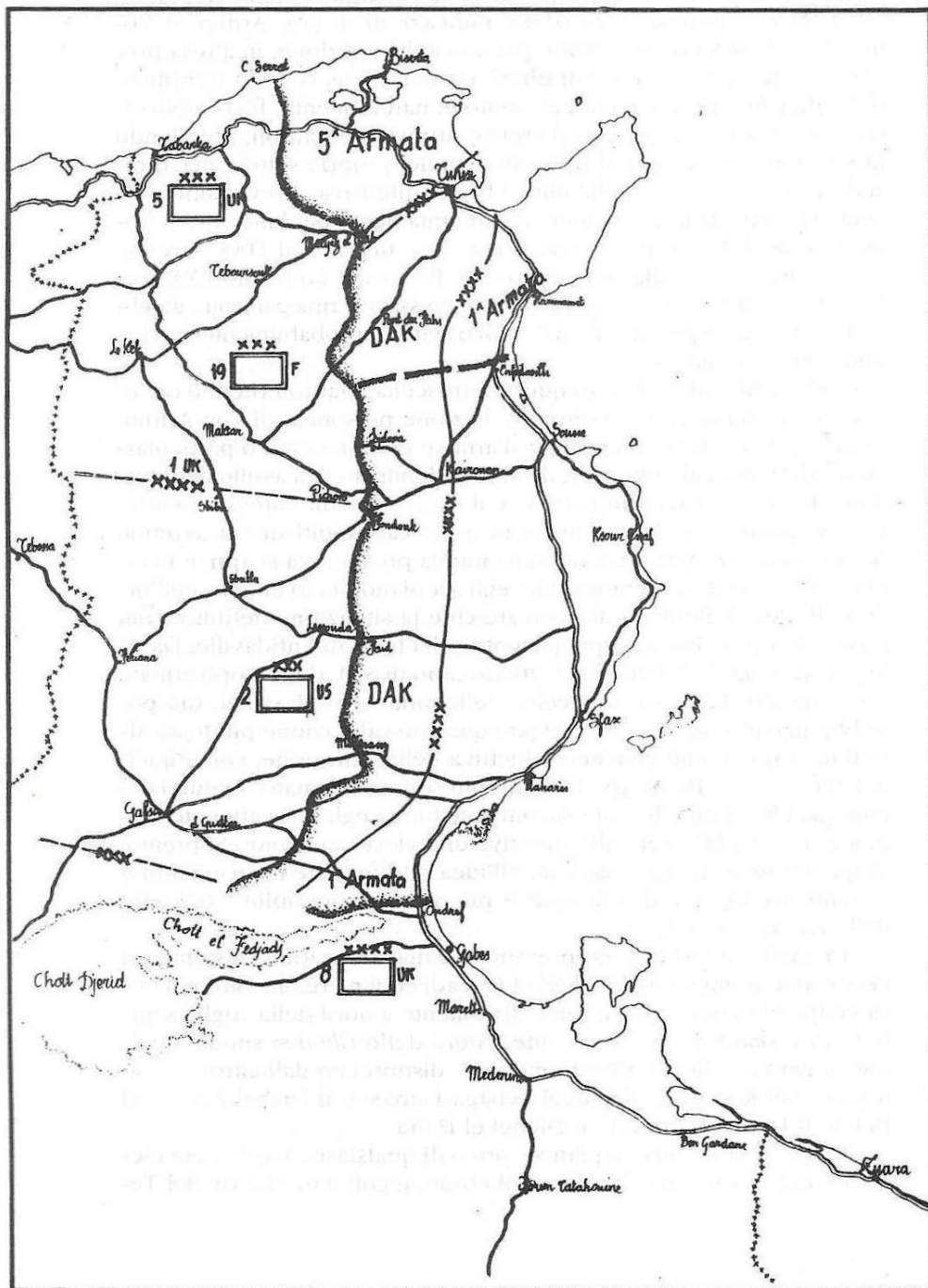
The threshold of Gabes is represented by the bottleneck between the eastern end of the *Chott el Fedjadj* and the sea: a gap of about twenty-five kilometers. Just north of the flowing threshold of *wadis Akarit*. Just north of the *Chott* runs an array of rather modest reliefs, distinct from each other: from the east, the Djebel el Roumana, the Djebel Tebaga-Fatnassa, the Djebel Zemlet el Beida, the Djebel Haidoudi, the Djebel el Haira .

The Djebel el Roumana, flat and devoid of any pretext, was connecting element between the Akarit and the umbilical hill of Djebel Tebaga

Indications schematic for the withdraw on the Enfidaville line

Schizzo n. 67

INDICAZIONI SCHEMATICHE PER IL RIPIEGAMENTO
SULLA LINEA DI ENFIDAVILLE



-Fatnassa Djebel to Haidoudi. And it was also the most delicate point of the line.

On March 30, the defense acquired a more defined appearance. The rearguard had flowed neatly; Sahara group companies and III *Monferrato* group, who had left the area of Kebili the 28th, were withdrawn across the *Chott Fedjadj*. Disbanded groupings Borowietz and von Liebenstein, deployment saw in the line on Akarit the XX Corps with the *Giovani Fascisti*, a good part of the 90th Light, the *Trieste* and *Spezia* in the front row and the rest of the 90th Light in reserve; on hilly cordon near the *Chott*, the XXI Corp with *Pistoia*, the 164th Light and Sahara grouping (sketch n. 68).

From the east, the resistance line ran along the north bank of the Akarit *wadis*, rocky, sheer, steepened by labor, about four meters high compared to the other side, constituting an really difficult antitank obstacle. Then they followed the preparations on the Djebel el Roumana - where eastern and western sides were provided with modest minefields (a total of just 8,000 mines) -and those in the hilly Djebel Tebaga-Fatnassa Djebel Haidoudi, crossed by a passage of a certain extent practicable by armored vehicles from the road and Oudref - Gafsa path. Finally, the defensive side to set up the best Saharan grouping of Mannerini at Djebel el Haira.

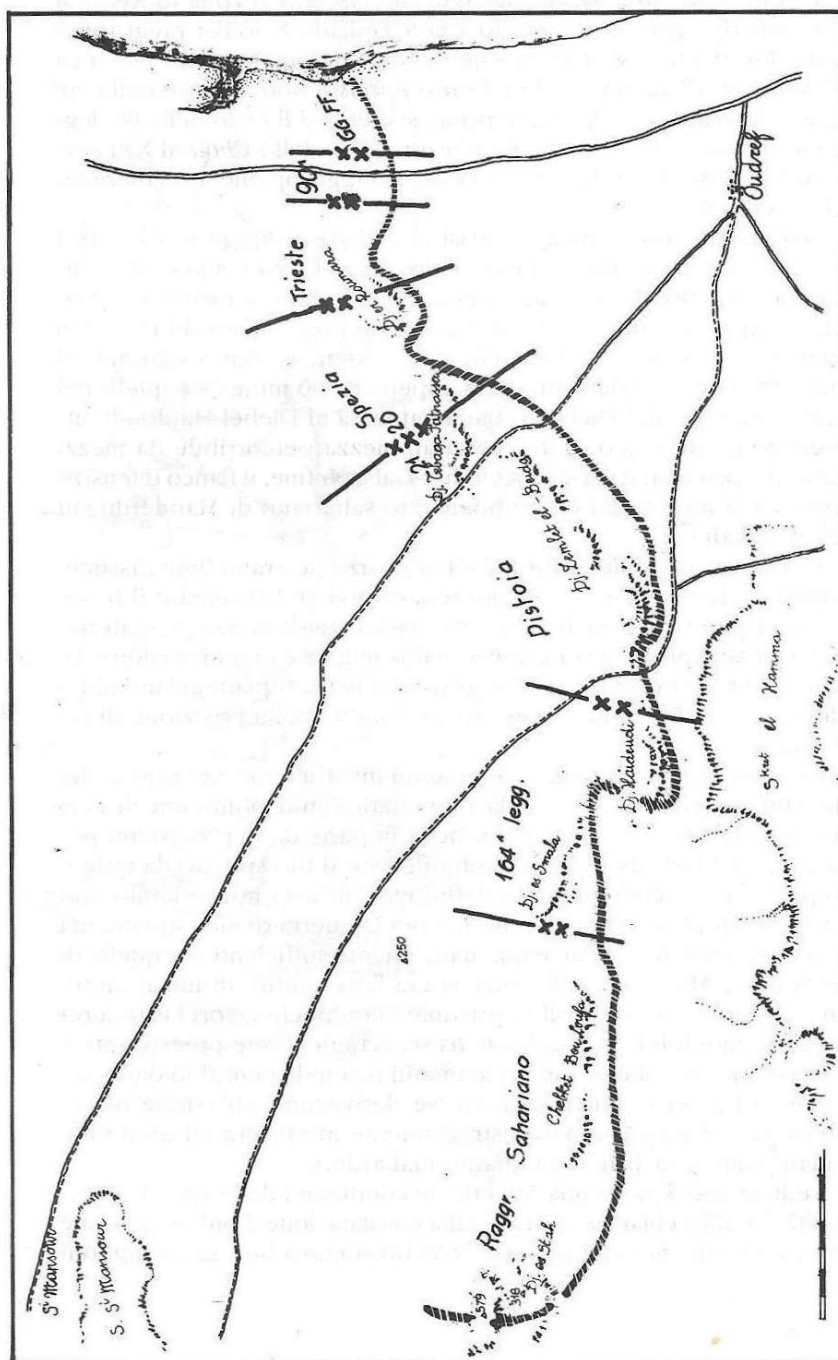
The solidity guarantees provided by the location were very limited, despite the feverish activity of the units sent to settle the soil. Unfortunately, the almost complete absence of mines and strengthening materials did not allow a better organization. The main concerns related the two flat sections on the flanks of Djebel el Roumana and the shallow depth of the position of strength.

As if that were not enough, the perennial shortcomings in the field of connections were exacerbated by the dramatic unavailability of telephone cord, saved just in part from earlier positions, which led to even use of barbed wire fence as phone lines! Ultimately, the army not only had not the means of connection suitable for the war of movement, but neither quantitatively and qualitatively sufficient for that location. At Mareth the deficiency had been felt to a lesser extent, having been able to recover with few permanent works of the extensive French network; *Chotts* was poor on the existing network and scarcer still the means for renovations made necessary by air raids and artillery. Resulting command action until the minor units extremely hampered and use maneuvered artillery as daunting than ever.

Let us now briefly the conditions of the single large unit. A clear idea stems from the observation of a general nature that the deployment on the Akarit-*Chotts* showed as many as 22 battalions

The deployment positions of the 1st Army at *Chotts* - Akarit

LO SCHIERAMENTO DELLA 1^a ARMATA ITALIANA SULLE POSIZIONI AKARIT-CHOTTS



and 39 batteries in less than that of Mareth. With the introduction of the few battalions complements unused and merging some units was reached to something acceptable. *Giovani Fascisti* managed to put together six small battalions: its I and II, the XI and VIII/8th Bersaglieri (with which had merged the V/7th Bers.), The IX independent battalion and the M battalion (with which had merged the VI Camicie Nere Battalion). The 90th Light had two battalions of the 155th and two of the 200th *Panzergranadiere*, the latter in reserve army. The *Trieste* kept its six battalions ⁽⁵¹⁾. The *La Spezia*, now commanded by Gen. Scattini instead of Gen. Pizzolato fell in the line of El Hamma-Gabes, had the 126th Inf. with three battalions and 125th Inf. with only its original III battalion, plus the *Tobruk* battalion of the *S. Marco* regiment and the 39th Recon. battalion. The *Pistoia* had its six battalions and also the XXXI sappers and the Muller group (III/115th *Panzergranadiere*). There followed the 164th light with two battalions of the *Panzergranadiere* 361st, the II/125th Inf., the I/382nd Inf. and II/433rd *Panzergranadiere*.

The Mannerini grouping had endured the greatest losses. Now it had the I and II/350th Inf., The I/36th bis, a machine-gun battalion, and the remnants of the I *Novara* group, as well as, his extreme right, the III Group and Saharan companies Group of the *Monferrato*. Even the artillery was poorly assembled: although maximized, the results were very limited, lacking the time to replenish and deploy new units in the making. On the rear, in addition to the 200th *Panzergranadiere*, there was the 15th *Panzerdivision*. To it, privately, was added the *Centaur* "combat group" made by the XII (former XVII) tank battalion with 11 tanks and from the 359th *semoventi* of 75/18 by just arrived from Italy.

Messe of course signaled the urgent need for reinforcements, both units as pre-announced, both new, and also complements, but the very next battle he would be caught with what he had.

In early April, the army remained almost completely devoid of vehicles: everything was used to evacuate north of Enfidaville stocks and materials not needed for the new test. They were even used as trailers the many vehicles damaged. However, this had a price: the measures taken did not escape the eyes of the soldier, and as far as you resorted to tricks to avoid the impression of preliminary further retreat, apparently spread some alarm that arrived in Rome. Ambrosio, perhaps informed by Kesselring, became worried and immediately turned to von Arnim:

"Preparing the position of Mansour - Enfidaville & retreat northward in excess of past elements in the rear, have, apparently, given rise to the belief in the ranks of a new withdraw. Against this conviction I repeat that, for both the testing done so far of enemy attacks, and after the arrival of supplies & of new troops, the situation has greatly improved & made so that the current positions can & must absolutely be maintained. It must therefore be fought by every means any

thoughts on retreats. It demands that all the arrangements concerning readying position Mansour & Enfidaville to withdraw into it, if you really absolutely necessary, are such as to exclude the sense of mistrust that might arise in commands and units about the robustness of the current defensive positions. It is better to run the risk of losing some of the material that detrimentally affect the spirit of the units with premature evictions. Similarly need to worry about not absolutely affect the spirit of the units with setbacks of the service units that are to be kept to a minimum (...)" ⁽⁵²⁾.

Moreover, Ambrosio ordered the careful recovery of Army personnel and aviation, Italian and German, still existing in the rear in order to revitalize the divisions. He also wrote to Messe: predispositions for withdraw must be limited to a minimum and carried out with the utmost caution so as not to create the confusing in the commands than the basic principle to stand on line Akarit -Chotts. "*Concept -Comment Messe -more easy to express in order to translate into reality.*"

Although all levels of command had been informed that a British attack could occur at any moment, it was widely held that were to take place in the period of the full moon, as usual, or at least in an advanced stage of the first quarter. Therefore, the Army Command was counting on a few more days.

On the other hand, the interceptions had first obtained the feeling that the enemy position attributed to simple retarding function, and this explained the immediate attempts by the English 1st Arm. Div. astride the tracks for Gafsa, in the area of Pistoia. Now, it was thought that the finding of a certain validity of the defensive deployment of the army was to force the enemy some time to mount a systematic attack.

The aggressive attitude of the British is expressed, unfortunately, even with an exceptional air activity along the roadways, on deposits, on airfields. The damage was extensive, but most seriously weighed the complete elimination of the Italian aviation in the south sector, destroying or temporarily put out of action for all aircraft.

At 23:00 of April 5, began the fire of a massive artillery preparation. British batteries had carried out at the last minute and now raging while the *Western Desert Air Force* stormed the immediate rear of the battlefield. The battle of Akarit began.

By studying the continuation of the offensive over Gabes, Montgomery had raised the question whether Rommel (!) Would use the line of Akarit to force at least a halt. Then, withdraw the Italian rearguard by the new positions, he ordered the 10th Corp to test the possibility of an expeditious attack not particularly onerous. Horrocks tried and the 30th replied that it seemed feasible but "*if the commander of the army is prepared to suffer*

heavy casualties". Montgomery was not at all. On his table lay a bundle of *Enigma* messages of Army Group Africa Command on 28 March. One said that all reservations had been absorbed by defensive commitments; another, that the level inventory was desperately low, so that "*a few hours can make a difference*"; third, that the fate of the front depended on arrivals of supplies from Italy. And, also, Montgomery knew that the 15th Panzer was even reduced to three or nine efficient tanks. Everything, but especially the knowledge of a *Enigma* dispatch ordering Italian labour units to leave the Akarit to go to fix the positions of Enfidaville, led him to believe can be part of a defense on Messe's terms ⁽⁵⁴⁾.

Everything well considered, Horrocks ordered to try again and to report to the next day if, in his opinion, would giving a powerful shock succeed. On the 31st, he had the answer: the 10th Corp alone would not have ever done. He had to wait for the troops of 30th Corp: for they could be given the task of opening a breach in which 10th Corp could enter. On April 1st, then, Montgomery informed Alexander: "*I was arrested by a strong resistance at the wadi Akarit. I'm getting ready to break through the enemy positions and be engaging a major attack at night on April 5, continuing on the day of the 5th*". What asked was one step ahead of the American 2nd Corp, "*if it could advance even a few miles, it would make my job much easier,*" he said. ⁽⁵⁵⁾

Alexander passed. The preparations would take a few days, allowing him to coordinate the offensive of the 8th Army with the two operations as we discussed previously. The feelings army leaders, on the 3rd he issued a new order of operations for the conquest of Tunis in two phases. The first he sets out to break the threshold of Gabes by a frontal attack by the 8th Army and an effort on the flank operated by the 2nd Corp in the area of El Guettar.

The second phase provided that during the exploitation of success along the coastal plain by the 8th Army, the 9th Corp of Crocker resumption attempting American 34th Inf. Div. and broke through on the front at astride of the direction of Fondouk -Kairouan possible to cut off the retreat to Messe, otherwise to accelerate the retreat northwards.

All that concerned the land forces, but there were other cards to play. Sea fighting the Axis convoys had intensified in the air and the Allied air forces had to facilitate the advance of the troops and, at the same time, disintegrate the Italian-German logistics system. It was designed so the operation *Flax* (Linen), intended precisely to interrupt aerial supplies from Italy.

To break through on Akarit, Montgomery had first considered sufficient to use a division of the 30th Corp, but the reconnaissance and information about the enemy were quick to understand the need

of at least two divisions. After much discussion, it was called the field of attack: the Djebel Tebaga-Fatnassa Djebel Roumana included. In the night on the 6th the 4th Indian Division, two brigades, would attack the Djebel Tebaga-Fatnassa, followed by the dawn 51st *Highlanders*, three brigades, against the Djebel Roumana. The 50th Inf. Div., with one brigade had to move between the two to complete the action of rupture (sketch no. 69).

On either side of the section covered impact should take place two diversions: the first entrusted to the 1st Arm. Bd. straddling the Oudref-Gafsa road; to engage the right of the Italian Army; the second to the 201st *Guards* Brigade in the coastal strip, riding on Gabes-Sfax roadway. The 10th Corp, consisting of the 2nd New Zealand Inf. Div. and the English 1st Arm. Div., would be passed into the column through the breach created, to achieve a goal to more than twenty kilometers beyond the Akarit.

Main factor of success was considered surprise. Therefore, in addition to not wait for the full moon, it was thought appropriate -on suggestion of Gen. Taker -that the 4th Indian to take place only a night operation without support of artillery, on the attack in advance of the other two divisions, to take over the Djebel Tebaga-Fatnassa. The result was the breakdown of the battle in two stages. The first was just the 4th Indian and was expected would end before dawn. However at 04:15 began the preparation of artillery that was to allow the 50th and the 51st Division to leave the base, cross minefields and overcome the anti-tank ditch. The second time, that is the completion of the successful, was conceived as a deep penetration - about three kilometers from the line of resistance -of three divisions behind a powerful mobile fire curtain. It had to be made in three quarters of an hour from 08:30 to 09:16. In this period the New Zealand *Minefield Task Force* would change the corridors open from 50th Inf. Div. into roads.

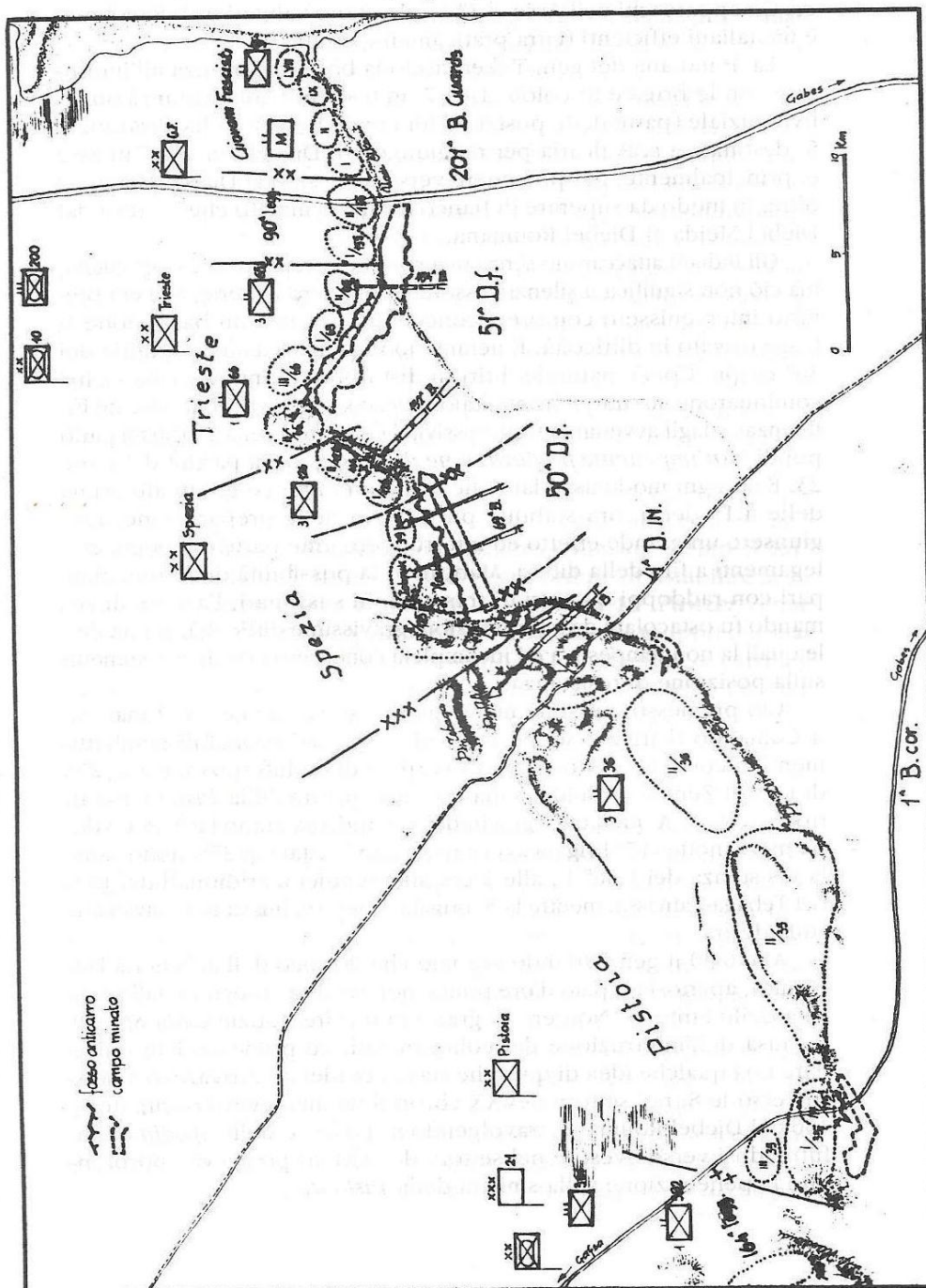
The balance of power evaluated by the 8th Army Commander encourage the best chance of success: 39 battalions plus 5 machine gun against 38; 400 field pieces or heavy field against 200; 462 tanks, of which almost half of *Grant* and *Sherman*, against 25⁽⁵⁶⁾. Similarly, the full satisfaction of logistical apparatus. Although the main base of the army was in Tripoli and the supply route and clearance is twist and turn along almost three hundred kilometers, the accumulation of ammunition, fuel, materials engineering etc., For the battle it was to eliminate any concern During the day of the 6th, the 30th Corp will fire 82,000 artillery shells and large quantities of ammunition for mortars and automatic weapons units without difficulty, because the replenishment will be rapid⁽⁵⁷⁾.

Naturally control of the sky was absolute. "*The 8th Army enjoys the fruits of an almost complete freedom of observation and attack*"⁽⁵⁸⁾. *The Western Desert Air Force*, that supported, had available 21 Britons and 10 Americans combat squadrons (59), which is

The Battle of Akarit (April 6)

Schizzo n. 69

LA BATTAGLIA DELL'UADI AKARIT
(6 aprile)



added for indirect support 20 fighter squadrons, 2 fighter-bombers and 11 of the *Northwest African Tactical Air Force*. And this without considering the strategic bombers of the Middle East, Malta and *Northwest African Strategic Air Force*. The Axis aircraft on 1 April were evaluated as 178 Germans and 65 Italians efficient (almost exact figure).

The 4th Indian of Gen. Toker left the base at dusk with the brigades in the column, the 7th in the lead to win the initial objective (of the positions held by I/36th Inf. of the *Pistoia*), the 5th set to climb over to reach the Djebel Tebaga -Fatnassa and, mainly, to proceed north until Djebel Meida and beyond, in order to overcome the side of the minefield that ran from Djebel Meida to Djebel Roumana.

The Indians attacked without specific preparation of artillery, but that does not mean the absolute silence of their batteries, which was expected intervene with short concentrations where a battalion had been in difficulty. Nor the silence of the artillery of the 30th Corp. Naturally, the shooting of disorder and neighboring interdiction continued throughout the German-Italian front, so that probably influenced by subsequent events, the Commander of the army then spoke of "*a massive artillery preparation*" starting at 23:00. And in any case established that the actions of fire made before 04:15 of the 6th, now set for the start of the preparation, obtaining an great effect and interrupted most of the few defense's wire connections. Lacking the ability to run to the shelters with double or subsidiary broadcast centers, the command response was hampered by serious difficulties to understand, first of which was not timely and the incomplete knowledge of the events on the position of strength.

That said, no wonder only at 03:00 the Army Commander learned from the XXI Corp of the likely ongoing fighting in the XX Corp and infiltration on hill 275 Djebel Zemlet el Beida, on the extreme left of the *Pistoia*, however, pushed back. At that time of the maneuver of the 4th Indian they were made. Shortly after midnight, the 7th brigade had occupied the aforementioned hill 275, despite the resistance of the I/36th Inf., The second was at the southern foot of the Djebel-Tebaga Fatnassa, while the 5th brigade was approaching to bypass on the right.

At 06:30 Gen. Orlando reported that the fire of the British artillery, which opened a few hours earlier, seemed not followed by the advance of the infantry. He was not able to deliver news of *La Spezia*, due to the interruption of connections. The first useful to give some idea of what was happening came to Messe at about 08:00: in the sector of XX Corp the enemy had occupied hill 166 of Djebel Roumana, overwhelming the II/126th Inf. of the *La Spezia* and infiltrating to the west, and in the XXI Corps had deep penetration on the left of the *Pistoia*.

The 50th and the 51st Division had moved regularly on a front overall of ten kilometers. The first was reinforced by a squadron of *Valentine* and one of *Sherman*. The second from the 23rd Arm. Bd. and a squadron of *Crusaders* of the 4th *County of London Yeomanry*. They were supported by the fire of fifteen field regiments and four heavy field. Each field piece in possession of 300 rounds, each piece of medium caliber of 150 shots.

The *La Spezia* received the brunt. Not only towards dawn it saw by surprise the Indian 5th Inf. Bd. on the Djebel Meida manned by II/125th Inf., but the center (*Tobruk* battalion and XXXIX Bersaglieri recon.) was committed by the 50th Inf. Div. and to the left - the Djebel Roumana occupied by I and II/126th Inf. – by the 152nd Inf. Bd. of the *Highlanders*. The counterattacks sector showed themselves inadequate. Only the intervention of the III/126th Inf. managed a conclusive outcome, but the reconquest of the positions formally held by the II/126th Inf. did not avoid the important hill 166 remain in the hands of the Scotts. Ultimately, shortly after 08:00 reports received by the commander of the army they were for a large gash at the boundary of the area between the *Spezia* and *Pistoia* by the 4th Indian and a no less disturbing interruption between the III and I/126th Inf. deployed on the southern slopes of the Djebel Roumana.

Messe immediately rushed to adjust. The 200th *Panzergranadiere* in reserve army and I/66th Inf. in corps reserve they were firmly instructed to retake the Djebel Roumana, while the 361st *Panzergranadiere* and III/36th Inf. were ordered to rectify the situation to the left of the *Pistoia* ⁽⁶⁰⁾. In addition, the 15th Panzer was moved to the area of the *La Spezia* and the Commander of the Army Group announced that he has set in motion a forty tanks of DAK to the Djebel Tebaga-Fatnassa. This set of measures, though seemed enough to solve the problem of the *La Spezia*, was in doubt regarding the gap between the XX and XXI Corps.

In fact, the real situation was not in terms believed by the Commander of the army. The Djebel Roumana substantially held well and the arrival of the I/66th Inf. was enough to eliminate the minor infiltration. So the use of 200th *Panzergranadiere* against the Indian 152nd Inf. Bd., absolutely superfluous, he had obtained the only negative result of employing prematurely a valuable reserve. Unnecessarily Gen Scattini also invoked the interest of Berardi to convince the commander in 200th to counter attack instead to the west, since the Djebel Roumana was still maintained, at least partially, by the III/66th Inf.

Where things were really bad it was the center of the *La Spezia*. The English 69th Inf. Bd. had made room for the passage of armored units, so that in the late morning the III/125th Inf., *Tobruk* and XXXIX Bersaglieri recon were eliminated. The 50th Inf. Div. was proceeding slowly but almost unhindered enlargement of the flaw "*that nobody* - Messe wrote bitterly in his report - *had perceived*

and reported the real importance and that in the afternoon then had to make the critical situation of the entire position." At 10:00 the XX Corp signaled an unpleasant news: the II/65th Inf., the left wing of the *Trieste*, had surrendered before the 154th Scottish Inf. Bd. Orlando provident now to contain the penetration with the III/65th Inf. of the *Trieste*, the M battalion of *Giovani Fascisti* and all the artillery used in the sector; however, the question demanded something more decisive and the 15th Panzer was reporting to the XX Corp to the need.

At 12:25 Gen. Nichols announced to Leese that enemy resistance on the front of his division was "*definitely broken*", definitely route⁽⁶¹⁾. Montgomery warned immediately Alexander: "(...) *all the main objectives were occupied according to the plan. The 10th Corp is now moving to the passes through the breach made by the 30th Corp*"⁽⁶²⁾. In fact Horrocks had taken direct command of the 2nd New Zealand Inf. Div., until then remained under the responsibility of Leese, and imparted the first provisions for passing the head of the division - that the 8th Arm. Bd., 2nd New Zealand Cavalry and 1st *King's Dragoon Guards* – in the interval between the 50th and the 51st Division. Except that the 8th Arm. Bd., Which began percolate around 13:30, came under defensive anti-tank fire and stopped almost immediately. So ran aground the forward thrust of the 10th Corp.

Since the late morning Messe had been able to examine the events based on the interception of British messages, according to which until then would be captured about two thousand prisoners, mainly Italians. Past noon made the point. The counterattack led by III/36th Inf. and by the 361st *Panzergranadiere* against the Indian 7th Inf. Bd. proceeded with difficulty; the action of the 15th *Panzer* against the Scottish 154th Inf. Bd. on the left of the *Trieste* was to start; another was being prepared against the Indian 5th Inf. Bd. to the right of the *Spezia*. What happened in the central part of La Spezia he knew little or nothing, but you still thought the worst.

For the moment, he could place the XXI Corp. A tactical group consists of units of the Mannerini grouping, in whose field seemed able to rule out concerns, it was in line to replace the 164th Light, which in turn the next morning they would settle the breach to the left of the *Pistoia* with the participation of units of XX Corp . These orders given at 14:30.

Soon came von Arnim. He was accompanied by Gause and also by Cramer, who had warned that they can not hold El Guettar indefinitely. Messe explained the state of affairs in which he appeared. He spoke of the "pocket" of a couple of kilometers wide and the same depth created by the enemy in the area of the *Trieste* and the counter attack being applied by the 15th *Panzer*, whose counterattack chances of success depended on the speed of execution. He spoke of the breach opened between the XX and XXI Corp to which he had to provide the 164th Light, released from the commitments of static defense.

No emphasizes on the British success in the stretch of *La Spezia*, not having experienced the true gravity. All in all, the increased uncertainty stemmed from the absolute lack of reserves. How many days was the army still able to resist? He asked von Arnim. Messe first was generic:

"The question can not be answered. Account should be taken that the enemy can feed the attack, while we can not feed the defense. It may be that we can still hold, but the concern arises if the enemy manages to penetrate the positions with the tanks. "

But then he had to admit that at most would hold still tomorrow "*throwing to the last man in the furnace*." Von Arnim announced the imminent arrival of other 70-80 tanks, but did not come to conclusions, preferring to await the developments of the situation during the night and decide in the morning ⁽⁶³⁾.

At this point he recorded another of the many oddities among allies. During the meeting he had received an order to von Arnim, apparently issued before leaving Ksiba el Medjouni, thus conceived:

"The 164th Light Africa should be removed from the Haidoudi-Smaia sector. The 1st Army will provide vehicles and bring to the zone of the Fatnassa airport available to the Army Group. Half battalion will be left at pass of Kresceffess. "

The message was shown at Messe immediately after the meeting, during which no one spoke of the measure. It was obvious the intention to steal the 164th Light from the jurisdiction of the army, to put it formally available to the Army Group actually in the hands of Bayerlein. It is noted that when discussing Messe had communicated the order given in the early afternoon to move the division for a given requirement, without von Arnim nor Gause were saying syllable. The measure did not appear any more executable, but the question had a sequel. Bayerlein tended to 'overdo', almost acting as trustee and interpreter of the commander of the Army Group and as Messe to protest, the breach of the prerogatives of command was repeated. The jealous ownership of German units will always continue to have primacy over any mixed arraignments. Apparently, Bayerlein had complained of the slowness of the Italian - would be much more accurate if he had complained of the disastrous condition of the transmissions - that the common interests often forced to issue instructions without authority, but von Arnim authorized him to give orders to German troops in his name ⁽⁶⁴⁾. Because such initiatives will be repeated during the same battle, and during the retreat, in spite of the formal clarifications of Messe, one is led to think of some basic misunderstanding rather than a deliberate indiscipline of Bayerlein.

shortly after 16:00 von Arnim departed, came other news. The situation of *Pistoia* and *Trieste* was restored thanks to the measures taken, while it was suddenly deteriorated in the area of *La Spezia*, where the static structures had collapsed and the enemy was close on the flanks of the artillery. The I/382nd *Panzergranadiere* were directed to plug the gap and 40 tanks of the 21st *Panzer* coming from El Guettar, but the counterattack was lively, substantially unsuccessful and ran out under five waves of daytime bombers of the *Western Desert Air Force*.

Late afternoon spread awareness that the next day the army would cease to exist if it remained in place. Messe warned von Arnim:

"(...) I believe that tomorrow the army could hardly still face an enemy attack, without creating a situation that could bring annihilation large part its units. Represent at the same time that any withdraw armed appears very difficult for both enemy pressure, and for this very few vehicles. ⁽⁶⁵⁾.

At 20:00 Gause phoned Bayerlein the notice of withdrawal and Bayerlein communicated it to Mancinelli. It was the decision, very concise and devoid of details, disengaged the army and retreat of thirty kilometers until the junction between the Skirra and Sebkeret en Noudal, under the protection of the 15th *Panzer* and Recon Bn.. Since the cantilever back was to be completed within the span that night and had big problems with transportation, Messe certainly gave the executive orders: the remains of the *La Spezia* and the *Trieste*, currently lacking fighting capacity, with the artillery of the army had to go directly to Enfidaville; the *Giovani Fascisti*, come to the pass of El Diem, halfway between Sfax and Sousse; the remaining troops were held for the new location, the XX Corp with the 15th *Panzer* and the 90th Light; the XXI with *Pistoia*, Mannerini grouping and 164th Light.

Complicating circumstances, already so tangled, they began several drawbacks. At about the 21:00 Gen. Mattioli called the Command Army Group to give notice of the order to retreat, but gave up sending the text as soon as to Mancinelli - that thought be the same already communicated by Bayerlein - said to already know. The original text came by radio before midnight, when the provisions for the withdrawal were under way, and pointed manner inconsistent with the provisions of the Army⁽⁶⁶⁾. Of course remained a dead letter because inapplicable.

Apart from this first mishap, after all of no fundamental importance, it was in the executive that occurred trouble. The simple branching order, almost everywhere by official business proved far from easy, especially in the XX Corp, so that the I/35th Inf., The XXXII Sappers and II/115th *Panzergranadiere*, located at the Haidoudi pass astride the

El Hamma-Gafsa road, did not receive the message and remained in place until the next day. Despite a planned deployment it prepared a few days before and although preliminary measures have already been adopted, sending the vehicles to the divisions encountered all kinds of difficulties and loading took place with the sole intent to make the most of the possibilities of transport without any regard for tactical needs. Finally, the movement of convoys was "accompanied" by the raids of 48 *Wellington*.

The following day the misunderstanding arose between the two commands on how the retreat had a sequel. Von Arnim noted that the decisions taken by the 1st Army about the *Giovane Fascisti*, *La Spezia* and *Trieste* difficult to reconcile with their directives. Messe, rather annoyed, explained:

"Withdrawal Orders were given to me last night at 20:30 according notice received by German Chief of Staff, & can not assume that order Army Group would contain detailed requirements about the location of employees divisions.

Deployment planned by Army Group mattered besides intersections at night is not executable. However 879/43 secret arrived at 23:45 when it was no longer possible to give counter orders. Solution adopted for the GG.FF. it was necessary to recover vehicles for road transport of troops left behind. Remains Trieste & Spezia withdraw on final line because excessively worn & in conditions not be reusable until after adjustment" ⁽⁶⁷⁾.

Von Arnim also dropped a veiled rebuke about the precarious situation of vehicles of the Army complained: "*On the possibility of withdrawal - he must have watched – the army was to have already from 31 March. It is believed that part of the army was doing everything possible to ensure the vehicles to the various units (...)*"⁽⁶⁸⁾. And of course Messe replied, even more annoyed:

"Army has been able to evacuate in time all that existed south Enfidaville line & that was not used for battle (bases, hospitals, stores, parks, shops, etc.) Precisely because it had strong views on the need for it would be delivered at act of turning in. Only through these operations one has been able to save many and have the time of withdrawal the maximum available vehicles. Let me clarify that at this Command that the Army Commander has always been concerned & cares for himself (as necessary is a question of his specific competence) to achieve availability every vehicles recoverable" ⁽⁶⁹⁾.

The fact was, as always noticed by the Italian commanders, that our divisions were in conditions not sustain even a phase of full movement in a war for which they were not organically structured, that faced with the use of an uninterrupted series of adaptations and replicate expensive and limited performance. This seemed incomprehensible to the Germans, who, although they saw some time with their own eyes the situation of the Italian unit, continued to report all their operational concept to the German divisions, almost always able to move, maneuver

and fight. It should however point out that in this case, by not ensuring the Commander Army Group, the 1st Army took care to provide vehicles for half of the 90th Light and the entire 164th Light. It is fair to also report a comment of Messe: "*I can not pass over in silence at El Alamein the Germans had not acted in the spirit of camaraderie and cooperation in respect of our non motorized divisions!*"⁽⁷⁰⁾.

The battle of Akarit left a bad taste in Messe, too heavy because the constraints suffered. Since the line by the deployment of *Chotts* a serious threat weighed on the right and behind of the army because of the situation of unstable equilibrium besetting the sector El Guettar-Maknassy. A threat which generated uncertainty understandable decision in the Commander of the Army Group and reflected, inevitably, down⁽⁷¹⁾.

The immediate investment of defensive position by the British brutally summed up all the weaknesses that with a little time available would be at least mitigated: scarcity of natural handholds, low efficiency of the few works of the battlefield, insufficient organization of the transmissions, incomplete influx of complements, unavailability of reserves, limited room for maneuver of the fire, almost complete disappearance of aviation⁽⁷²⁾.

In these circumstances, very discouraging, it is to add a conduct of the battle does not seem exaggerated to define almost "blindly". Commander of the army and even the XXI Corps practically ignored the developments of the attack of the 4th Indian overnight. And the day the news arrived always late, incomplete and contradictory, mixing with false alarms or illusory successes. It added that the Commander of the army believed the 2nd New Zealand committed to action against the right of the *Pistoia* the 1st Arm. Div. at the boundary of the area between the XX and XXI Corp, the Scottish 51st against the *Spezia* and 7th Arm. Div. against the Trieste.

In spite of such a framework, for the 8th Army it was not a picnic. "*The enemy - wrote Montgomery - making enormous efforts, kept me from ending in open ground before to annotate*"⁽⁷³⁾, although, in reality, a breakthrough failed to occur. And Alexander in his report said that as the battle lasted one day, the fighting were described by Montgomery as "*the most avid and savage as what had incurred after El Alamein,*" adding that "*the attacks and counterattacks are followed in the hills and the Germans as Italians gave evidence of a fearless determination and morale without equal*"⁽⁷⁴⁾.

The 1st Army gave an order of magnitude about their losses: the infantry of the *La Spezia* was reduced to a company and a half (ie, practically to zero), that of *Trieste* to three battalions incomplete. Not defined but strong losses of *Pistoia* and the 90th Light; even more those of the heavy artillery, especially in materials, due to the lack of means of towing. The 8th Army laminated the loss of 1,289 killed and 32

tanks destroyed or damaged, but at 22:00 of April 6, already had 5,350 prisoners, mostly Italians.

In conclusion, the battle of the *wadi* Akarit had a negative result for the 1st Army. However, the company managed to break away in full combat and to retreat the mass of his troops on new positions Enfidaville. For the British side is exactly the opposite.

3. THE OPERATION OF WITHDRAW TO ENFIDAEVILLE.

Von Arnim was facing an extremely complex and delicate issue. It was push back more than 250 kilometers, the southern front (1st Italian army), by removing the same time, for subsequent scenes, the along the western front (Afrika Korps and the Italian XXX Corps) under the pressure of an opponent with superior and mechanized forces. Mattioli informed the 1st Army Command concept of maneuver of the Commander of the Army Group: withdraw the Army on a whole series of "lines of retreat" subsequent accepting of each possible fight until the conversion to the right flank was not completed (sketch n. 70). The way each cantilever had to be established directly from von Arnim.

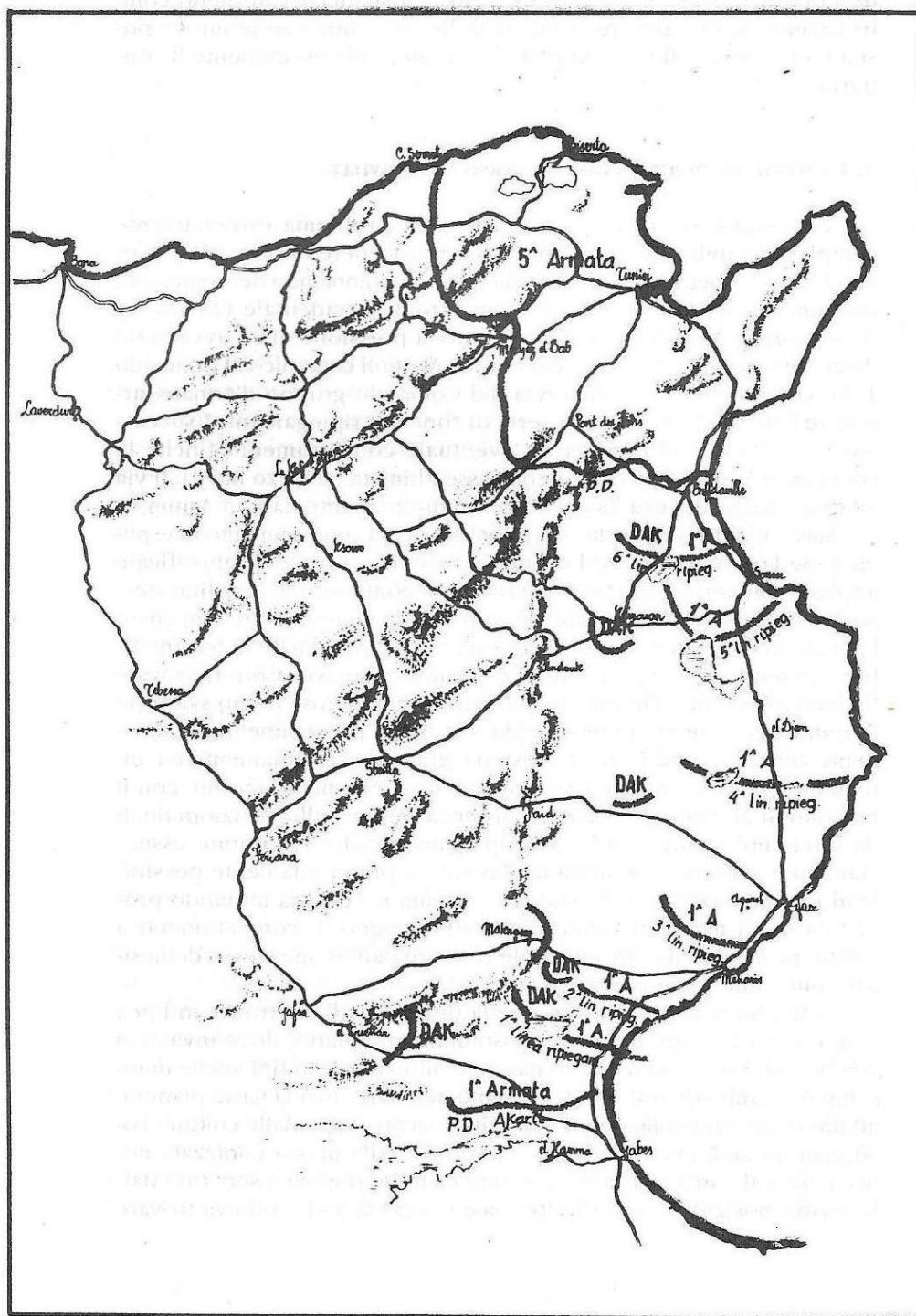
Messe was clearly of a contrary opinion and his comment was unequivocal: "If the late hour when the order came was a source of justified apprehensions, and other more serious it went the contents-order itself: it was evident that the Commander of the Army Group aimed to engage the army in fighting on successive lines close together in offering free land to the enemy armored mass, which had so far found limited employment opportunities, favorable conditions for the development of profitable operations in depth. A similar process, it was clear, would lead to the next and gradual disintegration and destruction of our units, especially those less mobile, with no result to come, or almost no troops on the final positions to defend. In my opinion the retreat was aimed essentially to steal the units of the army as quickly as possible from the reach of the enemy armored mass implementing elastic maneuver procedures without the commitment of fighting at the end, it was easy to derive from the examination proceedings the same situation of the enemy forces.

"From the line of *Chotts* that of Enfidaville run, as the crow flies, about 250 km. absolutely flat terrain, where you would seek in vain for a serious natural obstacle, usable for even just a stopping time at enemy columns, indeed the vast plain, not even compartmentalized by vegetation and the crops, was an ideal environment for the enemy to use massed armor, managing more than 400 tanks, as soon as he managed to come out from our positions on *Chotts*, the armored mass that could find

The operation of withdraw the 1st Army and DAK

Schizzo n. 70

LA MANOVRA DI RIPIEGAMENTO DELLA 1^a ARMATA E DEL DAK



limits to his reach only contingent logistical difficulties in function of the increasing distance from the field deposits hastily brought forward, but that very reason he yearned for battle as soon as possible. (...) From this, and other factors that here is not worth the effort to list, it was reasonable to infer that to subtract his non-motorized troops to the contact the enemy tanks, needed retreat by a leap, truck carrying them to a distance no shorter than 100 km. from the line of *Chotts*, protect them while riding mechanized rearguard that would slow down and hamper as much as possible enemy movement. In this way, in two or three days these troops could be deployed on profitable positions north of Enfidaville where among other things it was of paramount importance to first trim the defensive system.

"It does not seem sustainable objection that a rapid withdrawal of the 1st Army would have discovered the first side and the reverse side of the troops on the western front along Tunisia: it is clear that the withdrawal of these troops he needed to be carried out just as quickly as our and for the same reasons, as the facts demonstrate later; it could also be by independent routes than those of the 1st Army: it was therefore to harmonize the two retrograde movements, giving greater speed to the mass farthest from the goals. Instead the proceedings ordered by the Commander of the Army Group, to oppose the advance of the subsequent enemy mechanized fighting units, it did not take into account the operational capabilities of our troops already tried, massed on the few trucks that had been able to glean, many of which were those same services of Intendenza, driven by conductors civilians!" ⁽⁷⁵⁾.

In the night on 7th began abandoning Akarit- *Chotts* positions. The XX Corp moved completed in weak enemy pressure; also divisions 90th and 15th *Panzer* and 164th Light did not met serious difficulties; the XXI Corp, however, suffered serious delays in the transmission of orders and the small number of vehicles for which they had to have.

For each corps was assigned a route: given the conditions of the divisions proved sufficient. In the early afternoon the army settled down quickly on the line of withdraw and almost immediately found himself upon the British advanced elements. The DAK, disengaged from El Guettar without being disturbed, it was brought to the northwest of Sebkret en Noual transferring the Remondinis grouping to the XXI Corp.

Montgomery received overnight before the news of the abandonment of the positions by the 1st Army and from 06:00 was confirmed by aerial reconnaissance that not only the 1st Army, but also the DAK was receding. As the sky was filled with squadrons of British and American air forces, the 8th Army

marched. 30th Corp., with the 7th Arm. Div. and the 51st *Highlanders*, followed the coastal route; the 10th Corp. proceeded in two columns, the 2nd New Zealand Inf. Div. reinforced by the 8th Arm. Bd. and, further inland, the 1st Arm. Div. Obviously it was necessary to pursue with the greatest possible haste, and this was done.

Given the importance of the enemy armored forces and recognized the 1st Arm. Div. to the west and 7th Arm. Div. to the east, at 17:00 Messe communicated the situation to the Army Group Command:

"(...) Major armored forces engaging various elements of the front. I think that extending stop, of our forces numerically scarce & partly worn, almost all truck carried but not motorized, would face serious losses. Similarly heavy losses would occur if you should renew resistance on several lines later. Recognize opportunities to leave retarding function to only mechanized forces (15th and 90th part) by withdrawing as soon as the others to the final line (...)" ⁽⁷⁶⁾.

But von Arnim reiterated that the position must be maintained until further notice or until the evening of the 8th, that another twenty-four hours (sketch n. 71). Unfortunately, immediately to the east of Sebkret en Noual it occurred a penetration: the two battalions of Mannerini and three incomplete battalions of the *Pistoia*, widely distributed to the nuclei, would carry the British impact, so that the army commander had to seek permission to retreat to the Sfax-Agareb line. The higher consensus reached before midnight, however, to back a rush of fifteen kilometers, up the Achichina-El Guettar road, probably to allow the recovery of the DAK *Kampfgruppe* Lang from the sector of Maknassy. A new mistake in the transmission cost the loss of the Mannerini group, that only the next morning, he knew he was left isolated.

On the second line of retreat, organized hastily, Messe did count of units that remained. Given their scarcity decided to pass the command of the retreating troops to the XXI Corp of Berardi and send Orlando with his command of the XX Corp. directly to Enfidaville to organize the defensive position ⁽⁷⁷⁾.

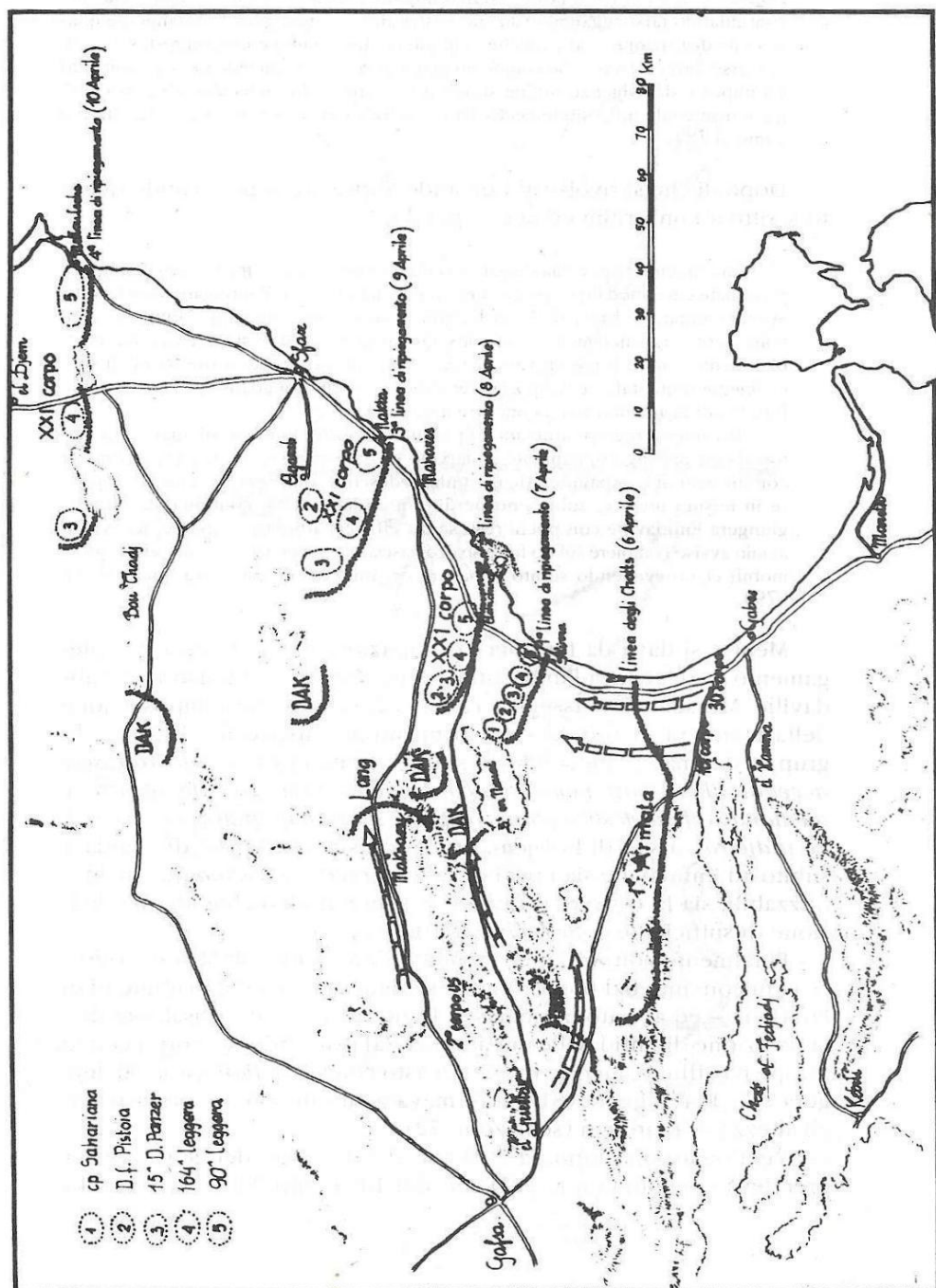
Now the army was "closely followed" closely. Early in the afternoon of the 8th, the 15th *Panzer* and the 90th Light were invested violently by the two British armored divisions. Given the imbalance of forces, both were forced to make an "elastic defense", that is, to give ground. At night the *Kampfgruppe* Lang was reabsorbed by the DAK. New discussions with the Commander of the Army Group - that the same day he had subtracted from the German units a battalion and anti-tank units to send them urgently to Fondouk - and new authorization to retreat about thirty kilometers, just north of Mahares.

Just taking into account the threat posed by a violent enemy attack in Fullriede, Messe wanted clarity. To von Arnim addressed the following message:

The move to the fourth line of withdraw (7-10 April)

Schizzo n. 71

LA MANOVRA FINO ALLA 4^a LINEA DI RIPIEGAMENTO
(7-10 aprile)



"Today's report authorization this Armies Group fall back on line at 7930-9210-9203 following breakthrough occurred opposite the 15th Armored I issued corresponding orders. I predict that this new line of more mobile & mightier enemy than we resume immediate contact, engaging once again our units already severely tried and extremely small. For that this command will make, I consider it my duty to repeat again that if we continue getting hook on subsequent lines, it will come gradually almost total destruction of the 1st Army that will reach Enfidaville line with the remnants of its G.U. of very low efficiency. If criterion adopted from this command to retreat it is a requirements imposed by a higher order, the 1st Army in full discipline bows before this inflexible necessity & where necessary will sacrifice to the last man" ⁽⁷⁸⁾.

After that he turned to the Comando Supremo, communicating what is written to von Arnim and adding:

"Document reflects disparities views intervened between me & the Commander of the Army Group about how withdraw once decided to abandon the *Chotts* line. System implemented by short halts & long stops on lines reached behaves whenever new engagements resulting in serious losses for both events battles against prevailing forces, & especially for lower mobility especially of Italian units carried on means & criteria unfit for purpose & not provided such reports as to conduct of action movement.

For these reasons have been lost in recent days that may have been saved the Saharan grouping & the *Pistoia* infantry largely remained with a couple of companies. Some German units, including the 15th *Panzer*, albeit to a lesser extent, suffer daily casualties. So continuing, the army come from Enfidaville few remains no combat effectiveness. I think it would be necessary at once make dramatic change, leaving only facing the enemy a mobile rearguard & providing immediately strike up a new defensive line organization" ⁽⁷⁹⁾.

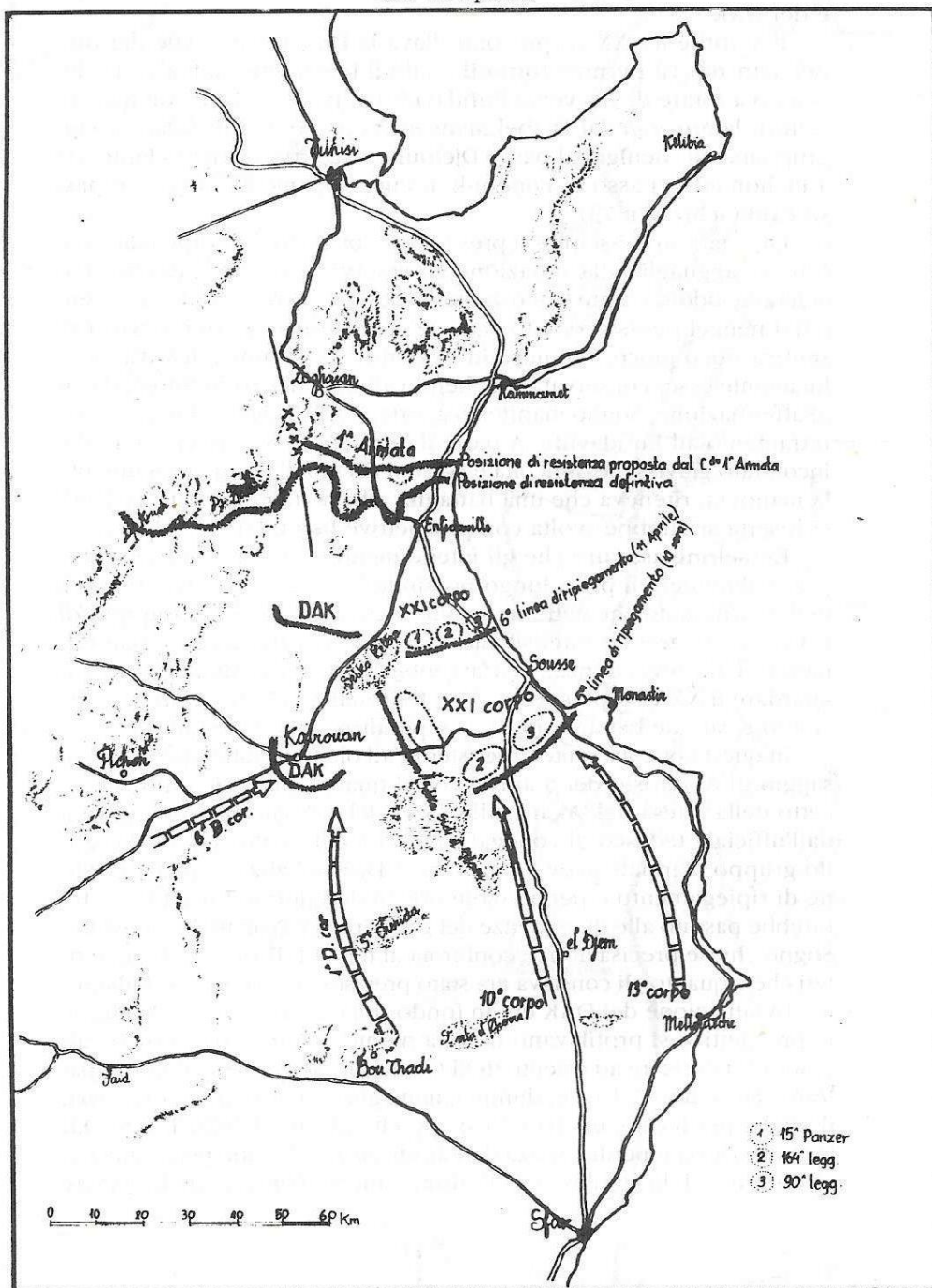
While it was busy for the occupation of the third line of withdraw and urged the basing of the defensive position at Enfidaville, Messe-not resigned to such a dangerous maneuver in setting retreat -Sending a new dispatch to the Army Group Commander, asking if the third line involved "*must be accepted battles resulting in new losses, or if adopting elastic defense can accomplish without engaging, anew backward cantilever*", south of El Djem. With the opportunity offered to send immediately to Enfidaville both the remains of Infantry of the *Pistoia* unusable because and the *Giovani Fascisti* to have on site at least a division of sufficient completeness ⁽⁸⁰⁾.

Finally von Arnim entered the order of ideas of Messe-or perhaps there was persuaded by the worrying performance of fighting at Fondouk - and accepted the request. On the 10th the responsibility of the position of Enfidaville was assumed by Commander XX Corp. with troops moved there, while the XXI, left with the 15th *Panzer*, the 90th Light and the 164th Light ⁽⁸¹⁾, stopping south of Sousse, more or less at Kairouan (sketch n. 72).

Twenty-four hours later, the 6th Arm. Div. the 9th Corp of Gen. Crocker contacted the 1st Arm. Div. of the 10th Corp of Gen. Horrocks

Schizzo n. 72

LA MANOVRA DALLA 4^a LINEA DI RIPIEGAMENTO
ALLA POSIZIONE DIFENSIVA
(10-11 aprile)



south of Kairouan abandoned by DAK. The British 1st and 8th Armies had joined in a united front.

I should, at this point, returning to the beginning of the month and on the long western front. Particularly in the areas of XXX Corps and the DAK.

On April 4, the XXX Corps controlled the Eastern Dorsale from Djebel Mansour (the pivot around which the southern front was intended to rotate 90° to Enfidaville) abreast of Faïd with four sectors: the *Superga* from Djebel Mansour the pass of Sidi Salah, grouping Benigni pass of Djeloula, Fullriede grouping at Pichon and the pass of Fondouk, Lequio grouping pass of Faïd (Sketch No. 73).

That day Kesselring went to the Commander of the Corps. He asked an outline of the situation and said that could be considered satisfactory in spite of the losses caused by the various enemies attempts were heavy, and although the serious shortage of reserves allowed little backlash. Then he pointed out that the line had to be kept absolutely. Taking then the right given to him by that statement, Sogno openly expressed his distrust in the retreat to Enfidaville. Apart from the fact that XXX Corps would encounter serious difficulties and risked shattering during the maneuver, he believed that a facing a battle in a fortified Tunis-Bizerte would be held with prospects very sad.

Kesselring assured that the intentions were geared precisely to defend the top as long as possible locations of El Guettar and of Akarit, so much so that in the weeks following the flow of troops and materials would be intensified. If the 1st Army, enjoyed the course earlier, he would have done in the meantime to safeguard the XXX Corp moving to Kairouan the 47th *Grenadiere* of the *Goering*, of two battalions (which, however, did not occur).

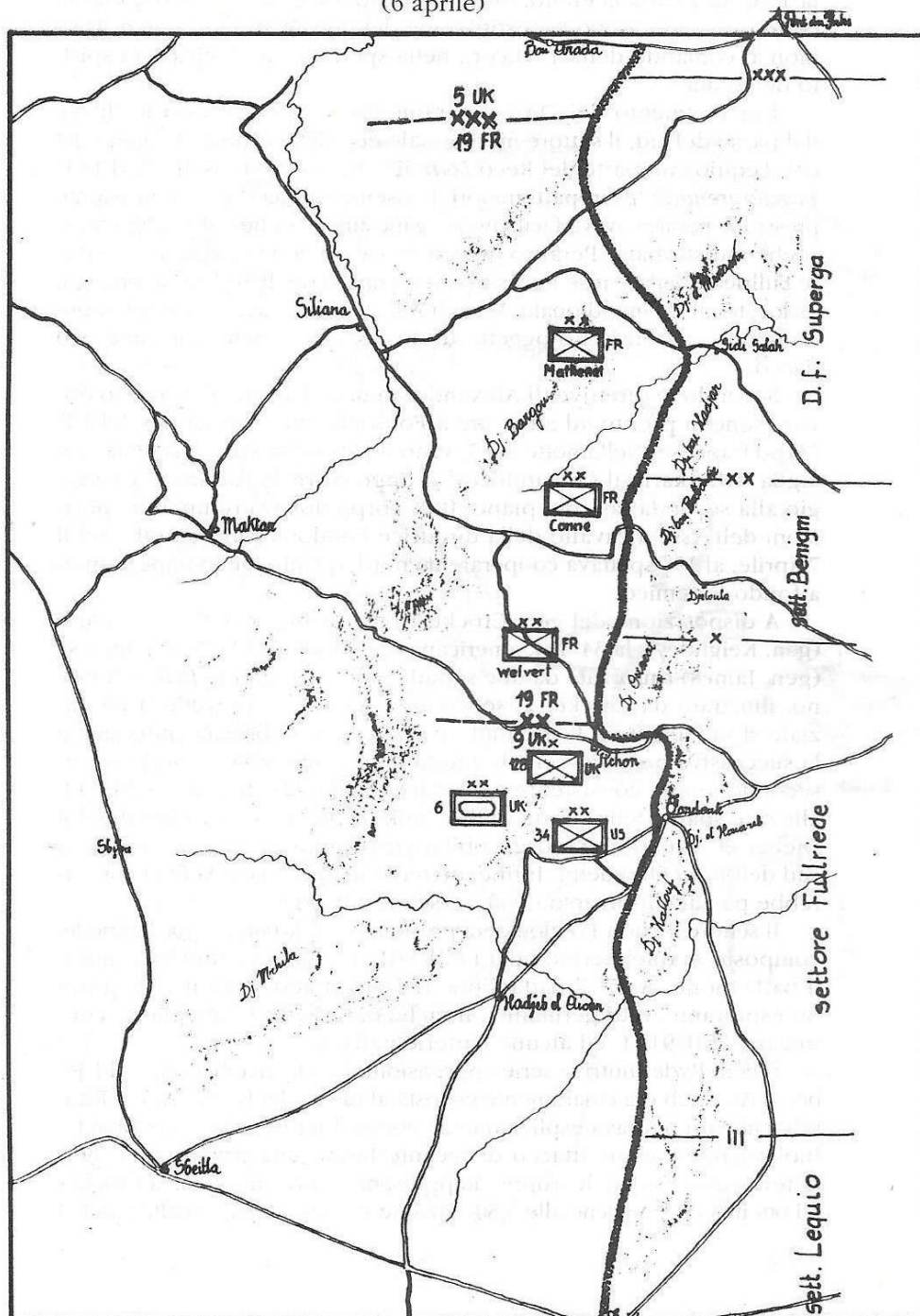
In this orientation of resistance to the bitter end, strengthened by the message from Ambrosio on April 5 with which was reaffirmed by the concept of the defense of Akarit, at 23:45 on the 6th Sogno received news from the German liaison officer, Lt.Col. Stoltz, the Commander of the Army Group had given to DAK and the 1st Army the order to retreat, and so at 20:00 hours of the 7th the Faïd sector would pass to the employ of Gen. Cramer. Not very convinced, Sogno asked clarifications and confirmation to Lt. Col. Broccoli, who reported that as far as he had been expected consisted only of cantilevered backward.

The situation of the DAK was basically stagnated. Although the prospects loomed matching nothing at all rosy, the renewed American attempts to east of El Guettar and Maknassy had been manifest unproductive. Easy, therefore, to imagine the discontent of Patton, who, incidentally, was irritated and because the efforts of the 1st and 9th Inf. Div. had caused losses without bearing fruit, and because not fully aware of the intentions of Montgomery. Moreover, the measures

The front of the XXX Corps (April 6)

Schizzo n. 73

IL FRONTE DEL XXX CORPO D'ARMATA
(6 aprile)



adopted by Cramer for the withdraw were interpreted as symptoms of a heavy counterattack with armored troops.

The US hopes to break through and fall behind the Italian 1st Army had, after all, become very warm. In some sense it derived the replacement of Gen. Ward with Gen. Harmon in command of the 1st Arm. Div., hoping to revive the spirit of the unit.

The retreat of DAK course had discovered the defenses of the Faid Pass, the southern sector of the XXX Corp controlled by Col. Lequio with the Reco *Lodi*, the T assault Battalion, the 104th *Panzergranadiere* and smaller units. The absence of a real and substantial enemy pressure had facilitated the release, which took place almost undisturbed. However, this engraved, to some extent, in the Fullriede sector because it was necessitated for recovery the II/91st of the *Superga*, located on the south wing. But the Allies were mainly interested in Fondouk, which already had been the subject of a US rather weak effort.

According to the directives of Alexander on 3 April, 9th Corps had to be ready to attack in Fondouk with the assistance of the French 19th Corps. In the night on the 7th, saw the unfolding of the victorious battle of Akarit, the Commander of the 18th Army Group ordered the transition to the second phase of the plan. The 9th Corp had to break the Axis positions straddling the director Fondouk-Kairouan on the 6th or 7 April; the 19th incumbent to cooperate from the north, less than fully committed against the enemy.

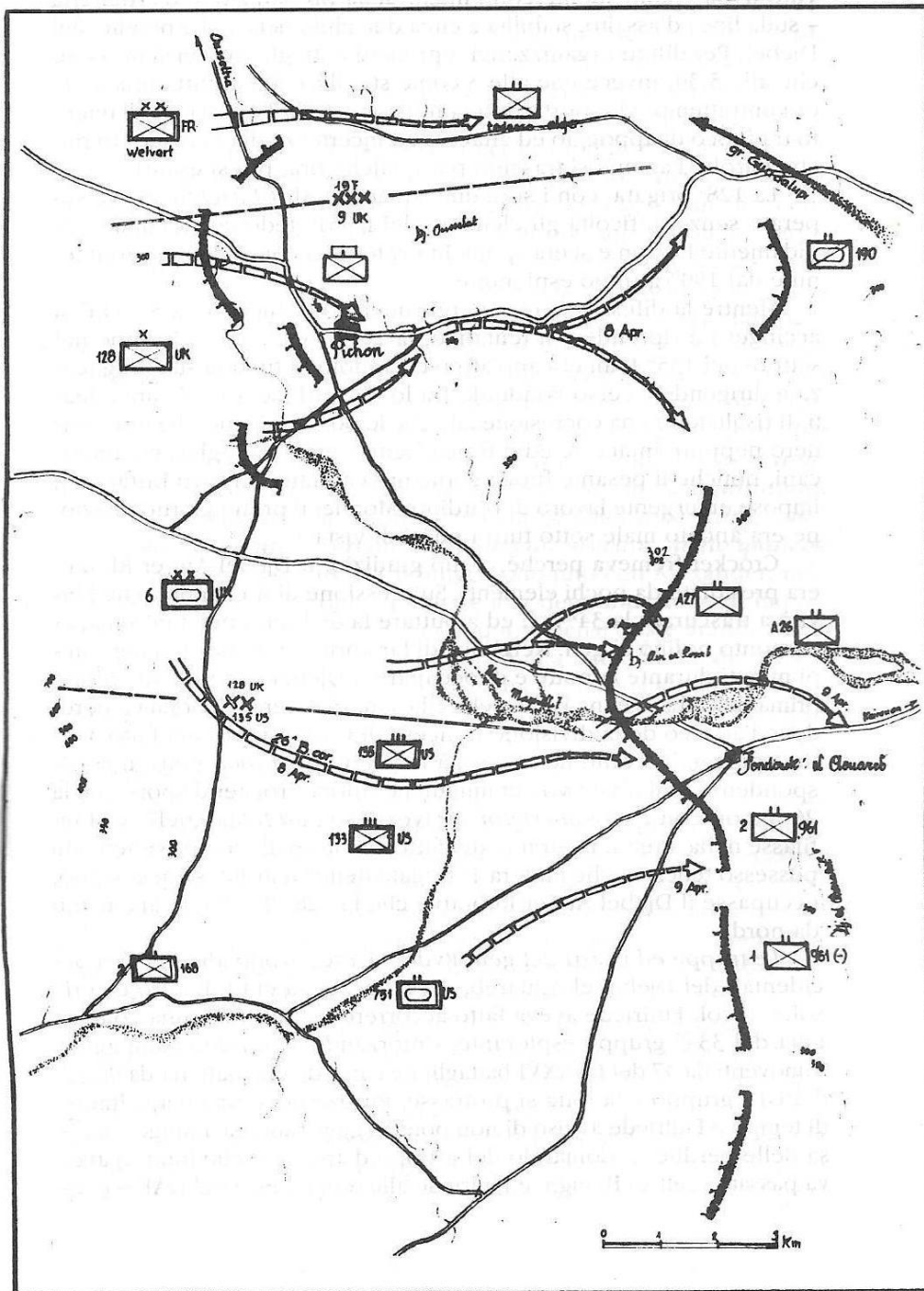
The dependent units of Gen. Crocker were the English 6th Arm. Div. (Gen. Keightley), the American 34th Inf. Div. (Gen. Ryder), the English 128th Inf. Bd. (Gen. James) reinforced by two squadrons of the 51st *Royal Tanks*. The plan, outlined by Crocker to subordinates on the 6th, provided an initial breakthrough in Pichon by the 128th Brigade reinforced and the subsequent penetration of this towards the south-east. Later in the attack consisting of the 128th Inf. Bd. and the 34th Inf. Div. both flanks of the Fondouk pass: the Djebel Ain er Rhorab and Djebel el Aouareb were the targets, respectively north and south of the Marguellil *wadis*. Finally, a third phase, wherein the 6th Arm. Div. It would pass through the gap (sketch n. 74).

The Pichon-Fondouk sector was manned by *Kampfgruppe* Fullriede, composed in that period of the I and II/961st Inf. just arrived in Tunisia, the A-27battalion, the German-Algerian battalion and 190th Recon. Bn, all Germans, as well as from CXXXVI annti-tank battalion, the II/91st Inf. and some Italian batteries.

Gen. Ryder harbored serious misgivings. His action against the Djebel el Aouareb was clearly exposed to the fire of Djebel Ain el Rhorab, not strictly defined as an objective of the 128th Brigade. In addition, a repeat attack recently failed once, could not inspire the troops. He represented his problem to Crocker and obtained that, instead of the 05:30, the action was brought forward to 03:00 of the 8th

The second battle of Fondouk (April 8 to 9)

IL SECONDO COMBATTIMENTO DI FONDOUK (8-9 aprile)



April, even if it meant the cancellation of the planned air raid on the Djebel el Aouareb.

The division prepared to invest the goal with two regimental columns (135th and 137th Inf.). The battalions of the head would have received the go - coinciding with the start of the preparation of artillery - the assault line, established about two kilometers from the slopes of the Djebel. For organizational flaws, the aforementioned battalions did not move until 05:30, instead of 03:00 as planned. There followed a series of mishaps that led to confusion in the infantry, disconnect between attack and fire support, command and uncertainties. In short, the action dragged on for a few hours, then ran out.

The 128th Brigade, with its two squadrons of *Churchill*, had easily surpassed the elements of the German I/961st, quickly occupied Pichon and had gone deep against the positions held by the 190th Recon. Bn.

While the defense reacted vigorously with fire and the 34th Inf. Div. was preparing to resume the attempt, the English 26th Arm. Bd. intruded in the sector of the American 135th Inf. crossing it in all its length and heading to Fondouk, to the astonishment of his allies. The result was a confusion that the German positions were not even nicked and intermingling between the British and Americans, as well as the heavy German tank fire drawn by the British imposed an urgent work of reorganization. Moral: the first day of action had gone wrong from every point of view.

Crocker was trembling because, in his opinion, the Djebel Ain er Rhorab was guarded by a few elements. Under pressure from Alexander, who ordered him to disregard the 34th Inf. Div. and throw the 6th Arm. Div. into the fray, at sunset ordered Gen. Keightley to open a passage in the minefields overnight and occupy the Djebel with a battalion before dawn. It was the dawn of the 9th and the situation had improved in the north, where the attack of the French division of Constantine had made its push felt pushing forward in the darkness the 2nd Tabor Bn.; But at target it was unchanged. Crocker then ordered that the 26th Arm. Bd. with his *Sherman* crossed the Marguellil *wadi* and caught in the pass, heedless of the fact that the flanks were still in German possession; that the entire *Guards* brigade, if necessary, to occupy the Djebel Ain er Rhorab and the 128th Inf. Bd. give a hand to the north.

Troops and tanks of Gen. Ryder stopped on the western slopes of the Djebel el Aouareb, but the matter was far from settled. Col. Fullriede had to rush from Kairouan a company of the 334th Recon. Bn., reinforced it with two companies of 47 of the CXXXVI self-propelled A/T battalion and a battery of 90/53 of the DIV group and the fighting continued. Unfortunately it was just time and Fullriede warned that he could not hold up much longer because of the losses. The Commander of the Army Group-which meanwhile had passed the Benigni and Fullriede sectors to the dependency of the DAK - considered

developments of the maneuver in retreat and asked to retain the positions for another twenty-four hours, in order to allow the DAK to retreat up to Kairouan.

At 10:00 of 10 April the 26th Arm. Bd. It was to the east of Fondouk. The request for instructions from Crocker at the 18th Army Group received no answer except at dusk: build on the success in the north and north-east of Kairouan and cut off the enemy from the east Dorsale⁽⁸²⁾.

The fighting Fondouk was essentially a defensive victory rather than a Allied success. Indeed in the Allied camp he provoked an incident for which he had to iron out thoroughly interested Eisenhower and Alexander. In a moment of a bad mood for the development of the struggle, at a press conference Crocker fell back to blunt criticism as strict on the training level and the fighting spirit of the 34th Division. Naturally, the Americans felt pricked in the national pride (already stabbed in the heart by the battle of Kasserine) and replied that the division had been given the more exhausting task to save British soldiers. What's more, the commander of the 18th Army Group not found better than to propose the withdrawal from 2nd Corp most of the Constantine to improve training. *"Men ended up drying - Eisenhower recalled -not only because of the bad treatment they had received, but even more insulting and derogatory comments related to American's combative quality, comments, originated from German prisoners, had some diffusion in the area"*⁽⁸³⁾. A long conversation with Alexander, in the search for a solution, led to the determination to employ the corps no longer in parts but what great organic unity and to enable it to participate in the final battle to prove its efficiency. Thus, eliminated in some way the 1st Italian army, the 2nd Corp would be moved to the north, through the rear of the British army, to take responsibility for its own sector in front of Bizerte⁽⁸⁴⁾.

The French 19th Corp had set in motion. According to the directives of Anderson, he had to take over the southern tip of Djebel Ousselat, north of Pichon, and prevent any enemy initiative in that area. But Anderson, in making assumptions about the battle of Akarit, had also directed the occupation of the Eastern Dorsale in case of withdrawal of the Italian-German to the south of Pont du Fahs. In view of this and based on the agreements made with Gen. Crocker, Koeltz stated tasks and objectives for his three divisions. To the Constantine (Gen. Welvert) should penetrate Djebel Ousselat at the boundary of the area between the Benigni grouping and Fullriede and get behind the Axis lines. The division of Algiers (Gen. Conne) had the task of giving security to the exposed side of Gen. Welvert and get in condition to attack the Benigni sector and win up to Djeloula. The division of Morocco (Gen. Mathenet) had

be prepared to force the pass of Sidi Salah and then turn north towards Pont du Fahs, eliminating the troops of the *Superga* garrisons of Djebel Menassir and Djebel Mansour.

The action of Gen. Welvert, which began at dawn on 8 April, did well and its deep penetration created a real threat of turning from the south the Benigni sector. This was divided into three sub-sectors: the north held by the *Grado* battalion and by the I/91st Inf.; the central held by the German A- 28 battalion and the southern occupied by DLXX Tunisian Militia Cohort. In reserve the XXIV/5th Bersaglieri with two companies (sketch n. 75).

French pressure showed on the far left of the area and -in the afternoon -the center. The DLXX Cohort was soon partially withdrawn under the pressure of the Moroccan 2nd *Tabors* Bn., so as to make it necessary to hasten the XXIV/5th Bersaglieri to form a defensive flank. Instead the A-28 battalion, devoid of wing problems, found no difficulty to easily reject the attempt of the Algerian 9th *Tirailleurs*. At sunset the fighting died down, except in the Fullriede sector where 2nd *Tabors* Bn., taking advantage of the dissolution of the German-Algerian battalion, partly due to the break through and partly due to the Allies, being able to move in the dark to exposed the German side defense fronting the English 128th Brigade.

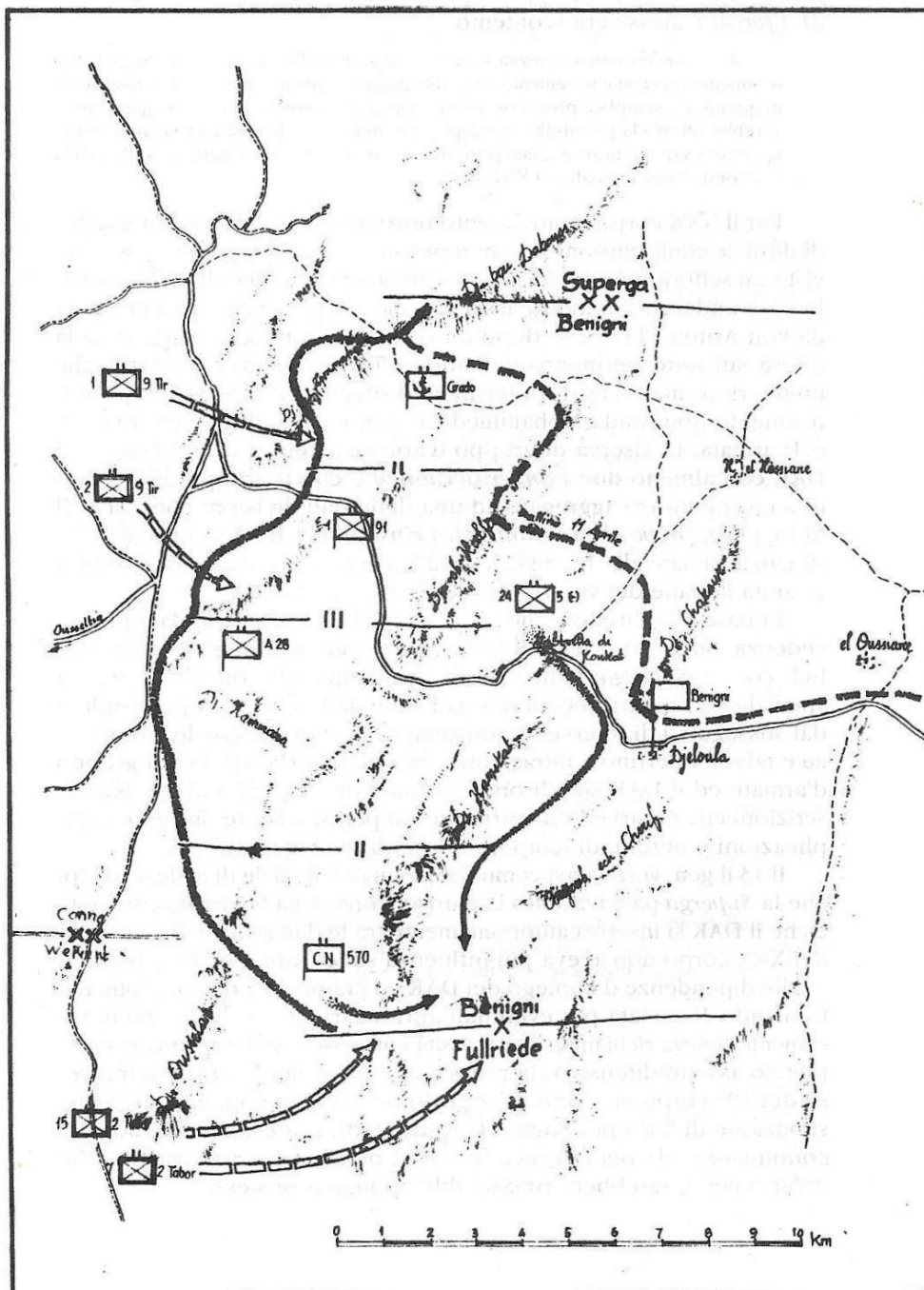
The next day, the situation remained stationary. At 14:00 came the II/104th *Panzergrenadiere* from Faid, but, although under the orders of Gen. Benigni, his commander put forward he can not be employed by the commander of the German 5th Army and only at 19:30 was convinced to move on the southern flank of the sector, extending the line XXIV/5th Bersaglieri. On the evening of the 9th Benigni considered the state of things without cause for concern. During the night, however, he learned that his troops together with those of Fullriede, were by noon ... under the dependency of the DAK. Gen. Cramer turned up, indirectly, shortly after the dawn of the 10th by delivering the notice of withdrawal to start in the day in time to be determined. At 12:45 he sent the executive order: abandonment of the positions at 20:00.

Meanwhile the French had begun to press. "*The exploitation of success begins for us since the dawn of April 10,*" Gen. Koeltz wrote ⁽⁸⁵⁾. The expression is certainly exaggerated. Within limits it may apply to the Division of Constantine, who suffered severe loss of Gen. Welvert, but not for the remainder. Indeed, it was only the penetration of the 2nd *Tabors* Bn., turned threateningly to the north in the afternoon, to procure a few problems to Benigni. At such times, Cramer at 19:00 decided to let the troops sit in place rather than withdraw them. Then he thought, or the situation appeared under different light at 21:45 and ordered a partial withdrawal of the center-left of the sector: the southern flank of the pass of Djeloula was abandoned in the night and the southern façade of Benigni was to assume a meridian course.

The Benigni sector (April 8 to 9)

Schizzo n. 75

IL SETTORE BENIGNI
(8-9 aprile)



The withdraw, now under the constant - though not nagging - pressure of the enemy, it ended on the 13th. That morning the Italian 1st Army recovered all the latest mobile units left behind to protect the most delicate phase of the maneuver: the detachments of the 15th *Panzer* and the 90th light, the 3rd Recon. Bn., armored car groups *Nizza* and *Monferrato*. Messe was unhappy:

"So - he reported bitterly - the army has reached the destination in precarious conditions and painfully fallen sharply in actual and in the media: painfully as a simple warning and a more prudent conduct of the withdraw would offer the opportunity to carry back much more strength and they could have been saved all or most of those who were lost on the first and second stopping line ⁽⁸⁶⁾.

For the XXX Corp the retrograde movement took place in a context of difficult to understand, but not his own fault. As it was expected his own sphere of corps within the 1st Army, things went very differently. The first directive issued by von Arnim on 11 April after an interview with Kesselring, about the defense on the perimeter known as fort Tunis-Bizerte, warned that further operation of folding became unthinkable. The alignment Bou Arada-Mohammedia was the limit of the area between the 5th and 1st Army. The reserve of Army Group would be formed by DAK with at least two *Panzerdivisionen* and with the *Centauro* battle group aggregate to one of the two armored divisions. All this, however, "*after that the front will be strengthened*". XXX Corp was destined to go to the 1st Army with the *Superga*, which in turn absorbed the Italian units of the various sectors of the Western Front.

Under the directive confirming the assurance given earlier, Sogno was oriented to form two sectors: one for Gen. Gelich with the *Superga*, the other for Gen. Imperiali with the 50th special brigade and units recovered from Faid and Fondouk. Regardless of the sequence of actions is not always in tune with the circumstances and sometimes even conflicting, with those of the commander of the Army Group and the DAK established the withdrawal of Italian units, the recommended times and routes ended up causing confusion, complications and loss of time, as well as for personnel ⁽⁸⁷⁾.

On the 13 Gen. von Vaerst communicated, through the liaison officer, the *Superga* passed under the jurisdiction of the 5th Armored Army and the DAK was to insert themselves between the two armies. Commander of the XXX Corp had no more influence on Italian troops transferred to the employ of use of DAK and was placed at the disposal of the army commander for any other positions. The order, which theoretically could refer to related needs not yet completed the defensive structure (the pressure of the English 5th Corp and French 19th Corp was strong and relentless), brought about a strange situation indeed for Sogno. These in fact, though discredited, had to continue the work of recovery and reorganization of the various units, which otherwise would have remained abandoned to themselves.

NOTES TO CHAPTER VII

- (1) DSCS, synthesis interview Ambrosio-Kesselring dated 03/23/1943.
- (2) DSCS, Note for the Duce date 02/17/1943.
- (3) DSCS, Memo to the Duce "Evaluation of the general military situation "dated 02/21/1943.
- (4) P. Puntoni, *op. cited* above, p. 125.
- (5) DSCS, Note for the Duce on 03/24/1943 -Appendix n. 27.
- (6) DSCS, Note for the Duce dated 24/03/1943 - Appendix n. 27. The document cited will be illustrated by Ambrosio to the Chiefs of G.S.E. (Gen. Rosi) and G.S.M. (Adm. Riccardi) the morning of the 29th.
- (7) V. Zincone, *op. cited* above, p. 151 et seq. Mussolini's letter to Hitler on 03/26/1943.
- (8) F. Deakin, *op. cited* above, p. 107.
- (9) Joachim von Ribbentrop, *Fra Londra e Mosca*, Bocca, Milan 1954 pp. 317-318.
- (10) L. Simoni, *op. cited* above, pp. 323-328.
- (11) April 10, Lanza noted: "*More and more serious news from the Tunisian front. Yet flaunt German officers in this regard, the most complete indifference. We understand perfectly the reasons for this attitude: consider that front as doomed and they intend to leave us the onerous task of providing for the last, desperate defense*" (L. Simoni, *op. cited* above, p. 330).
- (12) The "*southern front*" was changed to "*current positions*" before document delivery.
- (13) DSCS, f. 31039/Op. date 03/30/1943.
- (14) Since this phrase seems that Ambrosio had kept silent to Kesselring sending directives to Gen. Mattioli, albeit with reserves of orders for delivery. But the summary of the interview the next day it becomes clear how Ambrosio has frankly exposed to the marshal the procedure adopted.
- (15) DSCS, interview summary Ambrosio-Kesselring dated 03/28/1943 - Appendix n. 28.
- (16) DSCS, interview summary Mussolini, Ambrosio, Kesselring on 03/29/1943 - Appendix. 29.
- (17) DSCS, tele. 1256/43 on 03/29/1943, 12:10 pm, the commander Army Group in Africa.
- (18) DSCS, interview summary Ambrosio-Kesselring date 03/29/1943 - Appendix n. 30.
- (19) DSCS, interview summary Ambrosio-Kesselring on 04/01/1943.
- (20) DSCS, tele 73/43 dated 03/31/1943, at 23:25, the Command Army Group Africa.
- (21) DSCS, interview summary Ambrosio-Kesselring date 04/01/1943 cited.
- (22) DSCS, interview summary Mussolini Kesselring-date 04/01/1943, at 20:15.
- (23) See. in regard to the comprehensive examination of the deterioration in relations between the two navies in A. Santoni-F. Mattesini, *op. cited* above, pp. 349-359.
- (24) The Command of the German Navy in Italy was taken on March 12 by Admiral Meendsen-Bohlken, in place of Admiral. Weichold.
- (25) DSCS, interview summary Ambrosio-Kesselring date 04/06/1943 - Appendix n. 31.
- (26) Giuseppe Bastianini, *Uomini, cose, fatti*, Vitaliano, Milan, 1959, p. 90.
- (27) Reported by F. Deakin, *op. cited* above, pp. 257-258.
- (28) On the eve of departure Mussolini told Unripe, Finance Minister, he would vigorously recommended to Hitler to conclude an immediate peace with Stalin: "*If you succeed in this* - he added - *I'll deck with flags throughout Italy because that will mean the war is won*" (Giacomo Acerbo, *Fra due plotoni di esecuzione*, Cappelli, Bologna 1968 p. 488).
- (29) E. Dollmann, *op. cited* above, p. 256. It is likely that the unsteady state of health affects psychologically of Mussolini. The thought of facing Hitler delighted him, as has been said. According to the memories of Kallay, after firing big intentions "tugged at his hands, he curled up on the couch several times and added that he did not feel physically able to fight with the Fuhrer" (in F. Deakin, *op. Cited* above, p . 258).
- (30) Memo Appendix. 32. It allowed the development of the individual topics prepared by the three Operations offices of the Comando Supremo.

- (31) The balance of power to the detriment of the Axis was evaluated in these terms: battalions 1:1.6; artillery pieces 1: 2; tanks 1: 6; armored cars 1: 6; vehicles 1: 2; aircraft 1: 5 (for us while understanding the contribution of aviation Sicily).
- (32) J. Goebbels, *op. cited* above, p. 435.
- (33) E. Dollman, *Nazi Rome*, cit., P. 189. According to a Soviet general taken as prisoner, the U.R.S.S. He had lost 11,300,000 men. So, Ribbentrop said, the bill was easy to 190 million Russians, 70 were located in the occupied territories from Germany; the other 120 million, 11 had been eliminated. By calculating the 10% of the military potential population of a country, were available soldiers 12 million, but with the big problem of reserves (see. F. Deakin, *op. Cited* above, p. 262).
- (34) E. Dollmann, *Roma nazista*, cit., P. 151.
- (35) E. Dollmann, *Un libero schiavo* cit., P. 259. See. Von Rintelen, *op. cited* above, p. 181.
- (36) From this concern of Mussolini to the internal difficulties resulting from the continuation of the war, Himmler drew inspiration for proposing the establishment of a "M" army division with chosen material supplied by the SS and trained by SS instructors. According Dollmann, Mussolini, stunned, thanked him coldly (E. Dollmann, *Un libero schiavo*, cit., P. 258). Then, however, we will look back.
- (37) E. Dollmann, *Roma nazista*, cit., P. 188.
- (38) P. Struts, *op. cited* above, p. 129.
- (39) The establishment of the quartermaster general within the 18th Army Group had allowed the unified organization in the whole of Alexander responsibility area, with obvious and significant advantages. Without going into details, we'll just very little data: in February, the British army received 220 trains and tested the railway from Souk el Arba 200 tanks a day. In March, the ports of Algiers, Bougie, Philippeville and Bona treated a total of 12,000 tons daily.
- (40) Roosevelt-Churchill: Correspondence secret war, Mondadori, Milan 1975 p. 366.
- (41) W. Churchill, *op. cited* above, p. 539 and 546. In fact, March 31 von Arnim had 214,000 men and 99 battalions.
- (42) W. Churchill, *op. cited* above, pp. 542-544.
- (43) The 10th Bersaglieri, whose strength was 70 officers and 1,500 riflemen, was reduced to little more than 400 men. The evening bulletin of the Army Group on the 29th reported: "*It should be noted that the remains the 10th bersaglieri, about 120 men under the command of the regimental commander, yesterday held their positions until the last moment & have withdrawn only on the order of the division commander.*"
- (44) H.G. von Eisebeck, *op. cited* above, pp. 208-209.
- (45) *Ibid*, p. 209.
- (46) It was later clarified that the three American divisions -1st and the 9th Infantry and 1st Armor -they were distributed on the two areas of El Guettar and Maknassy.
- (47) DSCS, date 03/31/1943.
- (48) DSCS, interview summary von Arnim-Messe date 04/01/1943.
- (49) In practice, the joint command will prove to be very cumbersome, with significant impact in the increasingly tangled composition of the various blocks of forces. But it is to say explicitly that a heavy burden was probably exercised by the conviction that German units gave Italian units their reliability.
- (50) DSCS, f. 1023 date 03.04.1943 of Gen. Mattioli.
- (51) The 66th Infantry Battalion was formed from his I (Capt. Politi), already illustrious is in more than one occasion, the II composed of grenadiers and III formed with the remains of the *Folgore*.
- (52) DSCS, tele. 31137/Op. date 05/04/1943.
- (53) In that case, the 31st was wounded Gen. Berardi, who had gone to the line to survey the situation, and killed was Col. Albertazzi, commander of the 36th Inf. of the *Pistoia* who accompanied him.
- (54) F.H. Hinsley, *op. cited* above, p. 603.
- (55) I.S.O. Playfair, *op. cited* above, p. 357.
- (56) On 5 April the 8th Army counted on the following tanks efficient: the 1st Arm. Div. about 70 *Grant*

and *Sherman* and 57 *Crusader*; 23rd Arm. Bd. 71 with *Valentine*; 8th Arm. Bd. with 58 *Grant* and *Sherman* and 50 *Crusader*; The Force L (French) with 2 *Grant* and 12 *Crusader*. I have not calculated the *Stuarts* nor the few French tanks.

(57) I.S.O. Playfair, *op. cited* above, p. 368.

(58) *Ibid*, p. 369.

(59) The British squadrons of bombers were 5 *Boston* and *Baltimore*, 8 fighter *Kittyhawk*, 5 fighter *Spitfire* and *Hurricane* and 3 tanks destroyers *Hurricane* II D; the Americans were 2 bomber *Mitchell*, 4 *Kittyhawk* fighter-bombers and 4 *Kittyhawk* fighter (*Ibid*).

(60) In the meantime Gen. Bayerlein ordered initiative the 164th Light to send the of I/382nd Inf. to the left of the *Pistoia*, interference that caused the dry protest of Berardi.

(61) I.S.O. Playfair, *op. cited* above, p. 372.

(62) *Ibid*, p. 373.

(63) DSCS, interview summary von Arnim-Messe date 04/06/1943 -Appendix n. 33.

(64) I.S.O. Playfair, *op. cited* above, p. 374.

(65) DS commander of the army, tele 3029/Op. date 04/06/1943.

(66) The message of the Army Group (tele 879/43 Segr. Date 06/04/1943) began with "*The Italian 1st army leave the mobile rearguard in front of the enemy and at dusk the movement to reach the line 4 km southeast 9715 up to 9710 [= the line between the far north-east of Sebkret en Noual and Skirra] (...) "*. It is surprising that at 20:00 he is spoken of "notice" when the prescribed order to start the movement "dusk". And if instead of a "notice" it was an "advance order" short route, it is not strange that Gause has conveniently summarized the requirements that must be followed.

(67) DS commander of the army, tele 3046 / Op. date 04/07/1943.

(68) *Ibid*, tele 4840 / Segr. date 04/07/1943 Commander Army Group Africa.

(69) *Ibid*, tele 3045 / Op. date 04/07/1943.

(70) G. Messe, *op. cited* above, p. 209.

(71) See. Also DS commander of the army, date 04/10/1943, the Report on the Battle of *Chotts*, Appendix n. 34.

(72) It must be said that despite the mastery of the sky and the frequency of appearances, the Allied air force not inflicted heavy losses to the Army, except for some lucky accident. However, the trickle it referred the troops day and night causing a permanent tension that wore on personnel.

(73) B. Montgomery, *Da El Alamein*, cit., P. 91.

(74) H. Alexander, *D'El Alamein*, cit., P. 127.

(75) DS commander of the army, f. 338/2257/Op. dated 04/21/1943, Report on the withdraw from the line of *Chotts* - Appendix n. 35.

(76) *Ibid*, tele. 3036/Op. On 04/07/1943, at 17:00.

(77) To Enfidaville had been sent Gen. Boselli, who came from Italy the 6th to assume command of the *Giovani Fascisti*.

(78) DS commander of the army, tele. 3070/Op. date 04/08/1943.

(79) *Ibid*, tele. 3072 / Op. date 04/08/1943.

(80) *Ibid*, tele. 3073 / Op. date 04/08/1943.

(81) Alexander wrote: "*Messe gave proof of a very natural concern with regard in his Italian units, which went directly to occupy the new area, leaving the Germans the care of setting up the rearguard, a task for which they were more class suitable, "*"(*op. Cited* above, p. 128). It is significant to dig, but if the 15th armored and the two light divisions had been Italian, Messe could not have acted differently.

(82) I.S.O. Playfair, *op. cited* above, pp. 379-382 and G. Howe, *op. cited* above, pp. 582-590.

(83) D. Eisenhower, *op. cited* above, p. 198.

(84) The decision to use American forces to the extreme north front dates back to March 19, when Patton was ordered to transfer the 9th Inf. Div. the 1st Army, as its left wing, after the breaking of the Mareth Line. The measure had been adversely commented in the American camp, because the concentric offensive

envisaged for and the British 8th Army would necessarily eliminate the 2nd American Corp from the front, leaving him to Fondouk. So the final act would have been only one American division and moreover inserted into an ally complex. Gen. Bradley, vice Patton, obtained by these permission to travel from Eisenhower to demand an all-American sector, under an American commander, with an American strategic objective (O. Bradley, *op. Cited above*, pp. 92-95).

(85) L. Koeltz, *op. cited above*, p. 319.

(86) DS commander of the army, Report on the withdrawal from the line of *Chotts*, cited above.

(87) Gen. Sogno in his final report lamented the illogic of certain orders and the apparent lack of interest in the fate of the Italian units. "*It is not surprising - he wrote - that individual foot units (the rear guard of the III /91st, of Grado and the 1/91st) are gone, in part, scattered as they were private collective weapons transported on trucks and all support artillery, badgered by mechanized and motorized forces and cavalry attacked and, on the side and on the reverse side, from other units that had advanced thanks to the discontinuity produced by the withdraw does not appropriately staggered, in time, from south to north*".

Chapter Eight THE END OF THE WAR IN AFRICA

1. THE CONSTITUTION OF THE TUNISIAN FORT.

In Rome, concerns increased. The crux was always the same: the difficult problem to supply the fighting in Tunisia. On the 9th, during the conference Klessheim, Gen. Francis Rossi, deputy chief of the G.S. General was induced to send a discouraging message to Ambrosio:

"Maritime traffic all stopped due to bad weather, then steamer *Tommaseo* not departed. Increasing difficulty for supplies & deficiency ships & absolute prevalence of enemy air do consider the problem whether it is worth even less or continue to send Italian & Germans troops in Tunisia, according to the German General Staff"

But Ambrosio had immediately replied that obvious moral reasons and military demanded that we continue to make every effort and therefore units and materials already prepared had to leave in the programmed order. Now the same Kesselring betrayed ample doubts. Ambrosio admitted that the position of Akarit had been ceded too soon, contrary to his expectations, and that the fighting while maneuvering in retreat turned out to be harsh and exhausting. At the tactical level, the clouds that were gathering at Medjez el Bab were becoming darker due to lack of reserves. The logistics, the losses in recent days in the transport aircraft - they were acquiring the character of a massacre - accentuated the very well known difficulties.

And then, Kesselring continued, the Italian troops showed signs of fatigue. It was possible to send special troops to Tunisia or volunteers? Ambrosio discarded this solution or at least limited to small amounts of volunteers to enter the unit in place instead of complements⁽¹⁾. Then accompanied the Marshal to Mussolini.

In the conversation that followed, Kesselring laid stress on the need for a major effort to send to Africa "*many units to strengthen the fronts and create the neccesarry mobile reserve forces*".

There was not much time to spare - "a matter of hours," he said - because the upcoming full moon period was feared new attacks allies. You know the army was due to fall back because of a stretch of about twenty kilometers were just four battalions. The enemy could easily infiltrate and surround our units, forcing them into fighting in the open to avoid capture. At Medjez Bab el looming danger of a rupture of the front. It was therefore necessary to send aid at any cost, even with destroyers. The gist of the appeal of Kesselring was this: Italy

was to collect as many minors transports as it could, because there was little hope for large ships to escape to Allied control of the Sicilian Canal and the planes were scarce.

Mussolini expressed himself rather freewheeling:

"I had a long talk with the Führer. You MUST hold out as long as you can. The Führer gave an example: Stalingrad. Twenty-two districts of the city were in our hands, only two were left for the final occupation. The Russians did not given up, we had a reverse of the situation. We MUST resist not only until noon, but also up to a quarter after noon.

If we resist may create new strategic situations. If we give the Americans and the British would release three more armed the French divisions. We MUST resist. This must be the only one thinking of the people on the spot; no hope, only to endure to the end. In this sense I have already given orders to His Excellency Messe".

Not a syllable on the fact that the battle of Tunis was lost leaving for lack of supply. Merely strongly emphasized the need for '*last*' was operational meaningless, but Mussolini eventually let glimpse what, in his opinion, the "*resistance to the end*" was to continue: until autumn. Not for a strategic calculation, but for ... the hope for something to happen:

(In my visit to the Führer saw the correlation of all, I mean everyone, Keitel, etc., About the importance of Tunis. All possibilities can come true if we resist, and then we will keep"⁽²⁾.

The guidelines for the Army Group of Africa, extended by mutual agreement between the Comando Supremo and OBS, were simple:

"I. The Duce agrees with the Führer order to defend the area of Tunisia to the bitter end. The defense should be conducted offensively, as long as possible.

II. Army Group Africa will defend the line-Kef Abbed Dj.Mansour-Enfidaville and prevent any attempt at enemy landing. We must take every opportunity to improve the positions. It is urgent to re-establish and improve the situation on the right wing. Will be sent new forces (...)"⁽³⁾.

Supermarina and Superaereo and the 2nd *Luftflotte*, were charged the maximum aid of any kind in favor of the resistance overseas.

Von Arnim received the document and, for immediate action, a communication Kesselring, much more explicit about the defense of Tunisia:

"The Duce, to report compelled the General Ambrosio and me on 4/12, represented as follows his concept of the importance of the Tunisian theater.

He examined thoroughly with the Fuhrer, the situation in the Mediterranean. On this occasion they have consistently confirmed the crucial importance of the area of Tunisia in order to conduct a general war. It must have hold this area until the last for the following reasons:

1. Tie the Anglo-American forces of the army, navy and air force and

the tonnage used in North Africa that would otherwise be available for other operations.

2. Keep the minefield in the strait of Sicily to force the enemy to such further use of the tonnage that in connection with the successes of our submarines war could greatly affect the general conduct of the war.

3. Make it difficult for an immediate attack on the South Europe for which Tunisia would be the best springboard. Every day of resistance of Tunis is great gain that could lead to a completely new situation for the results currently not yet predictable.

He, the Duce, has decided to hold Tunisia, to employ without regard even his last merchant ship. On the other hand, he expects, also in accordance with the Fuhrer, the Army Group uses in combat until the last soldier in Tunisia " (4).

In a subsequent interview, Kesselring argued again the great importance of continuing the struggle in Tunisia for all the constraints that this would entail for the Allies, but von Arnim was poorly impressed by these speeches. Would obey without question, this was beyond doubt, but he made great account of the negative aspects of the situation. Also he doubted the solidity morale of the troops, once they had appeared to be a clear resistance hopeless. Messe warned that would not listen to any protest if he had to steal some units to send them to Medjez or Bab el Bou Arada. And he issued stern warnings against those spreading rumors defeatist.

Messe had another reason of discontent: the evolution of the position of strength. That indicated by the Commander of the Armed Group was likely to leave the entire deployment almost completely flat and, consequently, the better for the armored forces of the 8th Army. Probably this was due to the search for an artificial depth of the position that there was no correspondence in the morphology of the area and even in the entity and type of troops available. The mountain positions had been neglected, perhaps intending to carry on them a holding action, where the fighting was the worst aspect (sketch n. 76).

Messe knew nothing of the Enfidaville line. Since Col. Icardi, deputy chief of the G.S. General of the army, was at Hammamet to oversee the reorganization of those in the distant rest and to the development of logistics organization, he asked news and for details. Place the current poor choice made by the Germans, on the 8th, in the withdrawal, formulated proposals for variants that take into account the natural tactical holds. Von Arnim replied in the negative:

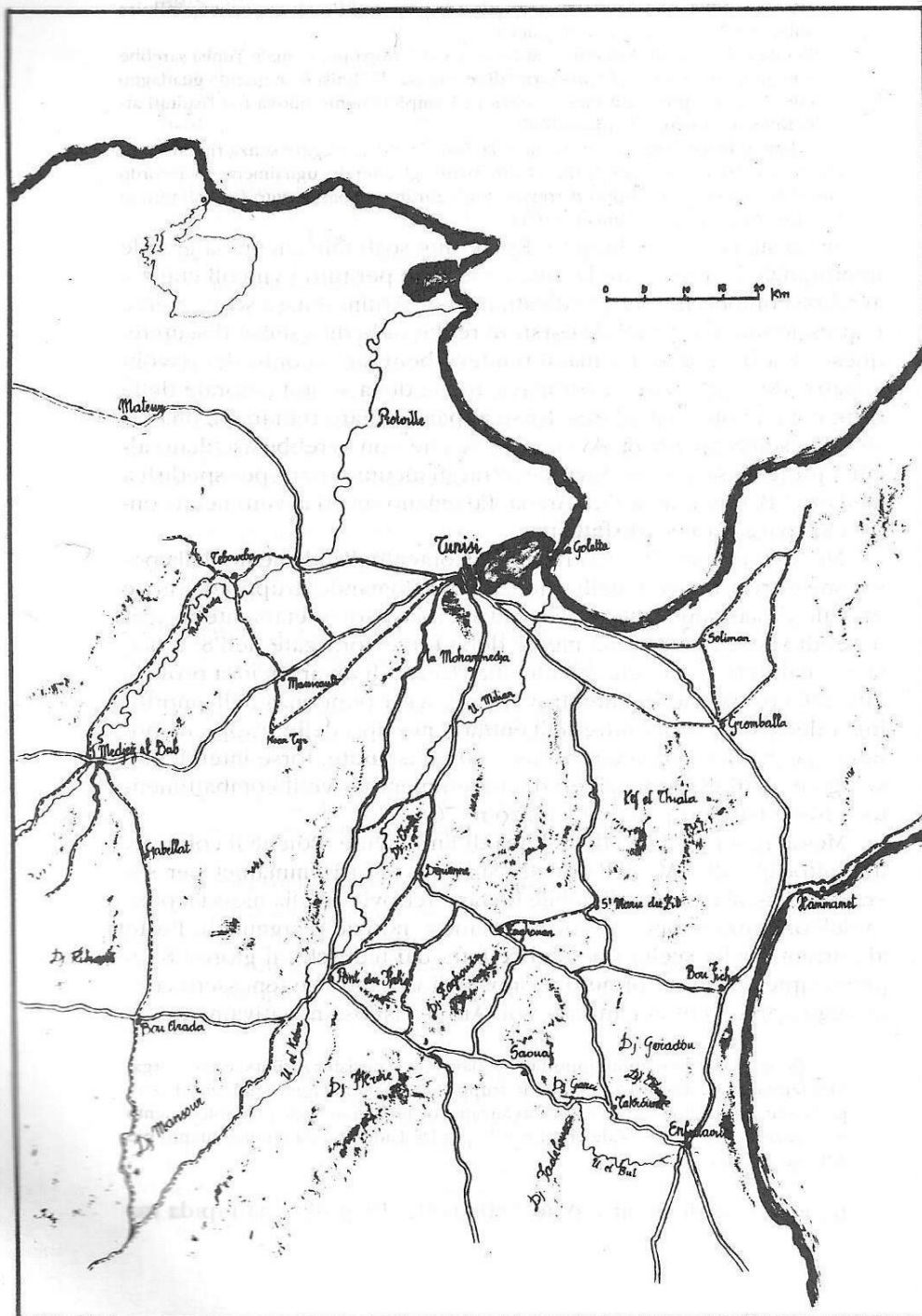
It is not possible to make variations to the Enfidaville resistance line. Organization in depth after troops the 1st Army have reached new positions & creation of an advanced line on the logical completion occupation position. This criterion applies to Dj. Fadeloun to be held as long as possible" (5).

The day of the 10th Messe came to Enfidaville. Performed a quick but

Morphology of the region between Tunis and Enfidaville

Schizzo n. 76

MORFOLOGIA DELLA REGIONE TRA ENFIDAVILLE E TUNISI



careful reconnaissance, returned to the charge with the Army Group that puts the decreased efficiency of the troops, the problems offered by the prescribed positions especially for the waiver to use the ground less able to maneuver armored formations, and proposing to establish the position resistance on the alignment of the heights and to reserve the line in question to a forward defense. Von Arnim replied with a long letter, but still rejected suggestions motivating intransigence with the need to avoid accentuating the salient of the XXX Corps, including water intakes for the water supply in Tunisia, could not be withdrawn; not to lose the advantage of a greater depth, to use the work already done and to obtain a better use of artillery from dominant positions in the lower separate plains.

Messe was not very convinced: apart from the first ground, the others appeared to order more theoretical than practical; however, he waited to see the outcome of the detailed surveys made by the commander of the XXI Corps and the *Spezia* divisions and the 90th Light. April 12, did not hesitate to repeat his disapproval, but reply of von Arnim was dry: *"Proposed changes to the line of resistance is not accepted. Line remains as ordered"*.

The question, however, was not yet closed. Mattioli was able to persuade von Arnim to a survey, the first device with a stork and then on the ground, together with Messe and with Gen. von Liebenstein: this time it was accepted a change in the western sector of the army. Messe was not satisfied and demanded a corresponding adjustment in the coastal sector to rest on the Djebel Tebaga. Von Arnim stiffened just with the changes! Except that on the 14th entered the line the 90th Light and it was the turn of the commanders of major units of the XX Corp, backed by Bayerlein, to request the correction in the coastal sector. New survey of von Arnim and the final decision of compromise (sketch n. 77).

Basically, it came to pass, the choice of a line naturally strong, but to track completely uneconomic. *"Based on these adjustments - Messe reported in the meeting - the front of the army was to assume a course of successive arcs between the coast and the hill of Takrouna, between this and the Jebel Garci, and finally between the Jebel Garci and Jebel Dib around the Saouaf basin. Essentially three returns: two ends of great width, one less central, supported against the salient of Takrouna and Jebel Garci"*. That at the conclusion of a series of orders which it can not affect the work, on the camps and on the soul of the same troops.

The situation was followed very closely by the Allies for the urgent need to conclude the campaign. On March 28 Gen. Brooke had been the need to end the conquest of Tunisia by the end of April, so that you can use again the Mediterranean routes and utilize fully *"to all ships in our unlimited"*

Schizzo n. 77

1^a Armata

XXI C.A.

XX C.A.

DAK

Djibouti

Suwayh

Uqaya

Sidi Youssef

Gili Gerville

Dj. Dikuma

Dj. Blida

Dj. Gama

Il el Beel

Legend:

- Linea ordinata in primo tempo dal C^o Gruppo Armate
- Linea successivamente modificata in seguito ad intervento del C^o Armata
- Linea proposta dal C^o Armata
- Primi capisaldi occupati

available." Not only that, but on April 7 the British chiefs of staff had reported to Washington the possibility that the Axis could orientate to mass evacuation from Tunisia, a thing to prevent at all costs.

On April 10, the decryption of *Enigma* messages gave another satisfaction the 8th Army: most of the 21st *Panzer*, the 164th and the 90th Light were forced to fall back on foot for lack of fuel, leaving the heavy material. That day Montgomery asked Alexander what would be the army charged with carrying out the main part in the final phase of the campaign. In his view it was to be the first of Anderson, as the plain to the west of Tunis best lent itself to massed armored raid, while the mountain curtain of Enfidaville not allow easy effort to break.

Actually Alexander had already reached a conclusion, in part because it suggested by the overall situation, in part because it suggested by Eisenhower. The commander in chief wanted the 1st Army - which, incidentally, was much better not to replenish the 8th - got a tangible recognition for the fight until then sustained. And of course, that hoped for by the American 2nd Corps. On the day of the 8th the 18th Army Group Command forwarded the plan, the next day the document was approved.

The answer to Montgomery by Alexander was immediate:

"The main effort in the next operational phase will run by the 1st Army. The preparations are already advanced enough to attack as soon as April 22. The most suitable area for the use of the armored is the plain to the west of Tunis; it is therefore appropriate that an armored division and an armored regiment are sent to the 9th Corp as soon as possible.

I hope you think develop the maximum pressure against the position of Enfidaville in conjunction with the attack of the 1st Army (...)"⁽⁶⁾.

When Anderson, the instructions given on the 12th were based on three key points: the offensive by the 1st Army with the aim Tunis; contemporary attack by the American 2nd Corp with objective Bizerte; strong pressure by the 8th Army against Enfidaville. The outline of the operation saw an effort led by the 5th and 9th Corps on the front Bou Arada Medjez el-Bab, with two moves of support: the American 2nd Corps (employed by Alexander) against Bizerte and the French 19th against Pont du Fahs. This scheme would lead to break the deployment of von Arnim into two with the bulk of the 1st Army, to sweep the remaining forces to the north with the US 2nd Corps and to crush to the south, behind of the Italian 1st Army and against the anvil represented by the British 8th Army, the bulk of the German 5th Armored Army. And thus the peninsula of Cape Bon would be immediately removed from the opponent.

The calculation of the opposing forces was presented by the 18th Army Group in terms extremely favorable: about 10 to 1 for tanks,

4 to 1 for field artillery and heavy field, 5 to 1 for the anti-tank guns. On April 16, Alexander issued out final guidelines for the operation *Vulcan*. Anderson had to conquer Tunis, cooperate with the American 2nd Corps - now commanded by Gen. Bradley replacing Patton, returned to Morocco to supervise the formation of the US 7th Army in view of the landing in Sicily –in the occupation of Bizerte and stand ready to cooperate with the 8th Army if the enemy had withdrawn the peninsula of Cap Bon. Bradley had the task of covering the left flank of the army and take Bizerte with the British aid. In fact, the formal dependence of the 2nd Corp by the Commander of the Army Group, due to the opportunity to meet the Americans desires, did not prevent Anderson was authorized by Alexander to give Bradley the necessary instructions for the coordination of operations against Bizerte and Tunis .

As for Montgomery, his role was enhanced. Pressure continues to be exerted against the Italian 1st Army was added the task of advancing along the Enfidaville-Hammamet-Tunis to prevent to the Axis the last refuge in the peninsula of Cap Bon.

2. THE BATTLE OF ENFIDAVELLE (19 to 30 April)

The operational problems that Messe had to face and solve had three fundamental aspects: the positions to be filled, the rearrangement of forces, the deployment to be taken.

He already mentioned the laborious and contrasted definition of positions on which to set the defense. The initial generic linear displacement implemented by 47th *Grenadiere* on indications of the Commander 5th Armored Army, was succeeded by a first array block with the remains of *Trieste*, *La Spezia* and the *Centauro* limited to the most important road junctions or sections facilitation and under the control of Gen. Boselli. At 08:00 of 10 April took the commander of the XX Corp over the responsibility for line with another division, the *Giovani Fascisti*. Basing was modified in part and on it he began the work of re-organization of the army.

Meanwhile work had undergone considerable ups and downs. Given that with what existed they could not hope particularly significant results, on 10 April, the situation was frankly painful three small segments of anti-tank ditch, built according impractical (for the non-earth esplanade, track non-economic, etc.) and in addition to manipulation by both sides by mechanized forces; some mined strips totaling 5,000 mines; Absolute absence of wire. At this point the draconian order came, but inevitable, to sweep everywhere extra personnel in order to revitalize the poor combat units. The first to be sifted units were workers of the *Intendenza*, because among them were organic units but without weapons and unit equipment (for

example, the 106th and 106th bis a anti-tank battalion, the 252nd and 281st machine gun battalion): five thousand men, a good three thousand were passed to the divisions. They were replaced by 1,200 men from the centers of instruction and, in rapid succession, by another 1,300 gleaned from the rear, even if devoid of any attitude.

However, between 11 and 13 April the defensive organization was studied in detail, in two sectors of the army corps and started with a breakdown of workers proportional to the needs of Berardi and Orlando, with a ratio of 1 to 4 in favor of the latter. On the eve of the battle had been completed nine kilometers ditch on the eleven planned, five-kilometer fence, minefields with 1,700 mines and 5,000 anti-tank mines.

The efficiency level of troops is easily recognizable in listing the remnants of divisions flocked to Enfidaville: *Spezia* and *Centauro* almost destroyed; *Pistoia* remained with two battalions in reordering and 28 pieces; *Trieste* with three battalions plus a reassignment and 29 guns; the *Giovani Fascisti* with five battalions and 27 guns; the 90th Light with four battalions and little artillery; the 164th Light with two battalions and almost no artillery; The 15th *Panzer* with fifteen tanks, three battalions and three groups of artillery. The corps and army artillery could count on seven and ten pieces from 105 to 149 Italians and a couple of German heavy batteries. Finally there were seven German anti-aircraft batteries.

It demanded an urgent restructuring. The centers of education of infantry, artillery and tank crews worked feverishly to collect and frame all elements used for combat, for complete units that managed to come from Italy (only the L Bersaglieri battalion and a company of the LI), to arm means sent from the motherland units hitherto devoid of armament and equipment and therefore used in the work. During restoration of all the personnel we thought it useful to flesh out the bloodless divisions - an issue also the subject of specific provisions of the Comando Supremo and OBS - It was found soon a further source of friction with the Commander of the Army Group. This had sent everywhere, even in the rear of the army, officers and detachments in charge of reviewing and possibly to seize personnel and media judged directly not properly used, that they could agree, especially for the 20th *Flak* Div.. There and then he escaped the attention Italian, but the 14th, when it became known that the Army Group Commander had ordered to move behind the line the center for instructions of infantry to employ or assign the workers, Messe reacted sharply communicating the G.S. for links:

"Please point out again to the Army Group Commander that, while you are implementing with all urgent measures for rational & logical recovery & personal use, I can not accept any interference in matters that affect only the 1st Army commander. Keep in mind that my criteria & who controls due to similar issues".

The friction nevertheless continued until, following an order of the Comando Supremo which provided the Army Group a share of the vehicles of the 1st Army, in late April showed up in the rear detachments of Germans who, flaunting an order of Commander of the Armed Group, claimed to take the trucks where they found them. Messe then immediately ordered that units oppose by all means "*also making use of arms*" in such a raid and sent a copy of the order to the High Command and, of course, to Bayerlein. And everything went back to normal.

Among the units of the new constitution appeared the *Duca d'Aosta* assault regiment of the Air Force of two battalions of 400 men each. Brought together elements physically and psychologically fit with others gathered and unsuitable, under a altogether bad framework. With the release of officers and NCOs of the Bersaglieri and the elimination of the most poor, the regiment gained a physiognomy of best expectations.

Messe had asked the Comando Supremo to take an interest with the Commander of the Armed Group that all Italian troops present were placed in the operating employ of the very impoverished 1st Army, but, despite the promises or rather the good intention of von Arnim, this was not possible, even under the pressure of requirements at many Italian units were moved piecemeal on the Western Front to power somehow the struggle in that area.

Gen. Mattioli had to mentioning a strange plan to Kesselring and Gause: the creation of battalions mixed Italian-German, but in truth the proposal surfaced at the official level and the rest would be rejected decisively. Instead Messe accepted the measure to include Italian and German battalions in the divisions conversely, recognizing the advantage of a convenient distribution of more efficient Germanic armament. It was not, however, a novelty and gave rise to serious problems, although would increase the difficulty of the action command in the Italian divisions to the German battalions, which tend to act independently or to oppose another order given by German authorities. It should be underlined that, unlike what implemented at El Alamein, ie a "crisscross" system with undefined command responsibility in each sector, now was the criterion of full dependence of the battalions from the Division Command responsible for a tract in front.

For all the reasons we discussed, the deployment took on more precise form to the 17th. On the following pages shows the deployment with which approached the battle of Enfidaville. Deserves notice the disappearance of the *Centauro*, as such, from the scene: the armored units joined the Piscicelli group or to Reco Lodi; others spent in the employ of the *Pistoia*; the division Command repatriated.

The defensive system included a forward position, a

safe area and a position of resistance. The first existed only briefly and followed the line originally chosen by the Army Group. It was to be occupied by elements able to firepower and mobility, to simulate that it was the main location. These elements were also responsible to prevent tactical exploration of enemy penetrated the security zone without opposition, and avoiding to let hang from overwhelming pressure. The safety zone was deep at Enfidaville, of Biada and Saouaf - where within the space created position of strength compared to the original positions - and very thin before the highlands of Takrouna and Djebel Garci. One was a steep and rocky high ground about 150 meters which enjoyed a good domain view and shooting on the ground to the south and was incorporated in the position of strength, which in fact was one of the pillars. In fact, it allowed flanking action on the two side curtains, had the tactical requirements for resistance to the bitter end, it could exert a dampening effect behind enemy who had ventured in "called a" natural defensive position. The other had the most outstanding topographical. It was a broken mountainous complex, about 900 meters from the slopes now steep now less marked, and could they felt decisive penetration in the position of strength.

The deployment saw essentially the XX Corp to the east with the 90th Light, the *Giovani Fascisti* and *Trieste*, then the XXI with the *Pistoia*, the 164th Light and *Spezia* (sketch n. 78 and 79).

Two of the major issues to be resolved concerned the artillery and reserves. The rapid process of reordering had permitted the development of battery more than 250 pieces of various caliber. Mostly they are suffering from a very limited range, but some compensation for this position of inferiority was found in the capability of going behind cornerstone and implementation of good scouting network. Given the trend of defense and the favorable characteristics of the natural environment, artillery gravitated toward the center of the position, divided into two groups, so as to give each its own field of action and at the same time for wide band overlap at the internal wings of the army corps. The result will be a strong advantage against an attack. It practiced almost exclusively in the central section.

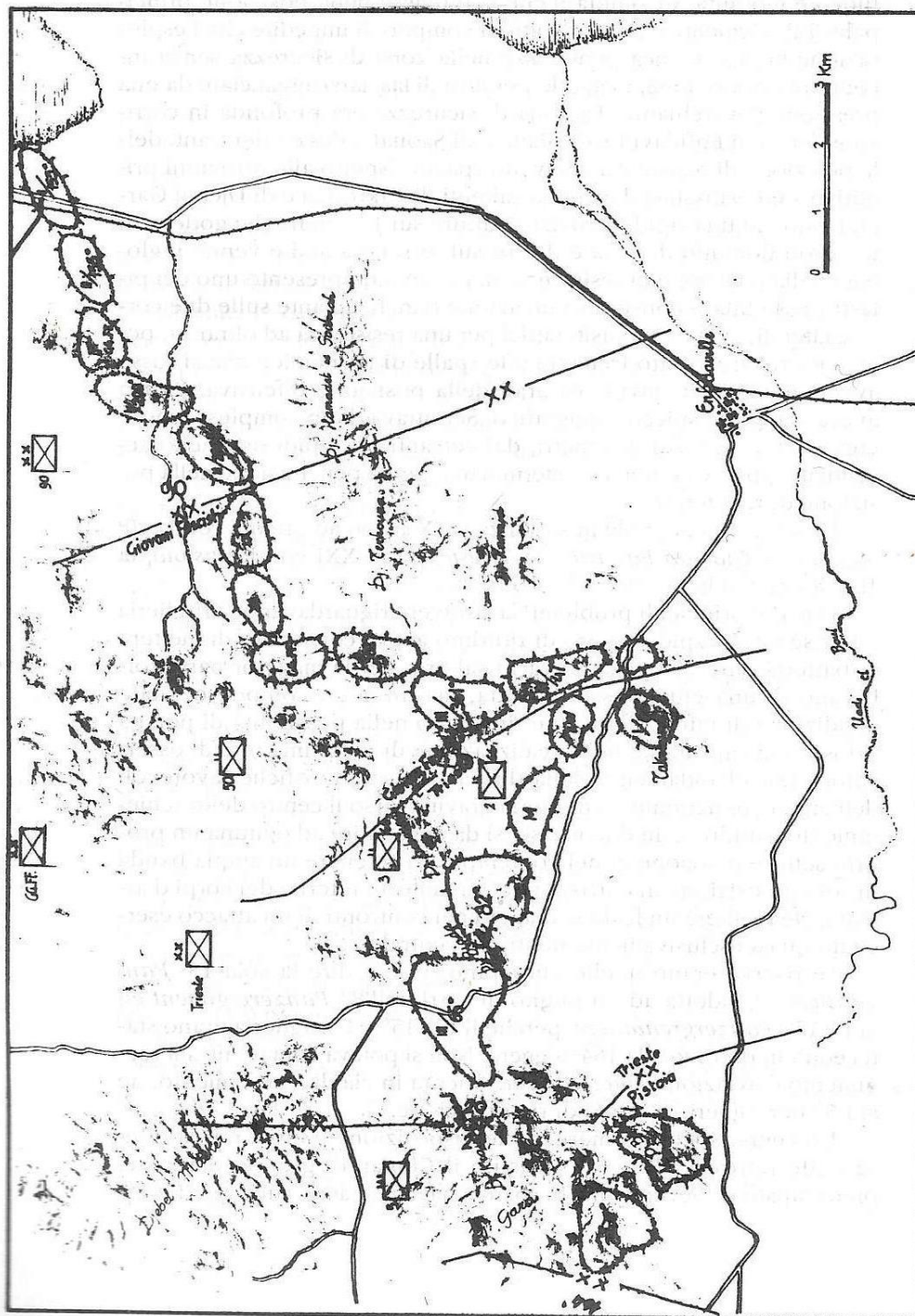
The reserves were what they were, that is the only 15th *Panzerdivision*, reduced to a handful of tanks of the 8th *Panzerregiment* and the I/115th *Panzergranadiere*, because the II/115th and artillery had been transferred to the reinforcement the 164th Light. You could not count either on *Duca d'Aosta* aviation regiment, still in the process of adjustment, nor the 5th Bersaglieri, ongoing recovery.

A deserves specific mention the provisions taken for the defense in the rear. Army Group Command had insisted on, worried by the possibility of landing ships or aircraft on the rear of the Army.

The deployment of the XX Corps

Schizzo n. 78

LO SCHIERAMENTO DEL XX CORPO AD ENFIDAVILLE



Schizzo n. 79

[illegible]

ORDER OF THE BATTLE OF THE 1st ARMY as of April 17	
Commander: Gen. Giovanni Messe Chief of the G.S. Italian: Gen. Joseph Mancinelli Chief of the G.S. German: Gen. Fritz Bayerlein	
Command XX Corps (Gen. Thaddeus Orlando) with:	
<i>Trieste</i> Inf. Div. (Gen. Francesco La Ferla) with:	
III/65 th Infantry	
I/66 th Infantry	
II/66 th Infantry (remains of the IV Grenadiers	
Battalion.)	
III/66 th Infantry (remains of the <i>Folgore</i>)	
X. "M" CC.NN. Battalion	
Paratroopers Bd. (<i>Luftwaffenjäger</i>)	
82 nd Complements Battalion	
five artillery groups (30 pieces)	
<i>Giovani Fascisti</i> Inf. Div. (Gen. Guido Boselli) with:	
1/1 st <i>Giovani Fascisti</i>	
XI/8 th Bersaglieri	
IX Battalion. Autonomous	
III/47 th <i>Panzergrenadiere</i>	
I and II/361 st <i>Panzergrenadiere</i>	
five artillery groups (41 pieces)	
90 th Light (Gen. Theodor von Sponeck) with:	
I and II/200 th <i>Panzergrenadiere</i>	
II and II/155 th <i>Grenadiere</i>	
LVII/8 th Bersaglieri	
II/1 st <i>Giovani Fascisti</i>	
900 th Pioneers Battalion	
two field batteries (9 pieces)	
Army Corps Support:	
16 th Artillery Group C.A. (10 pieces)	
102 nd <i>Flak</i> Regt.	
Command XXI Corps (Gen. Paolo Berardi) with:	
<i>Pistoia</i> Inf. Div. (Gen. Giuseppe Falugi) with	
II/35 th Infantry	
II and III/36 th Infantry	
340 th Engineer Battalion.	
I <i>Novara</i> armored car group	
two groups of artillery (15 pieces)	

La Spezia Inf. Div. (Gen. Arturo Scattini) with:
 III/125th Infantry
 I/126th Infantry (formerly 84th Complements
 Battalion)
 II/126th Infantry (formerly 350th border guard)
 III/126th Infantry
 106th Anti-tank Battalion.
 252nd mortars 81 Battalion.
 281st guard border machine gun Battalion
 I/47th *Grenadiere*
 five artillery groups (20 pieces)

164th Light (Gen. Kurt von Liebenstein) with:
 II/115th *Panzergrenadiere*
 II/125th Infantry *La Spezia*
 I/382nd *Grenadiere*
 I and II/433rd *Panzergrenadiere*
 220th Recon. Bn.
 two groups field Art. (14 pieces)

Army Corps Support:
 33rd Recon. Bn.
 24th artillery group C.A. (8 pieces)
 135th *Flak* Regt.

Army Reserve:
 5th Bersaglieri with XIV and XXII Battalion.
Duke of Aosta Regt. with two battalions
 I/35th Infantry *Pistoia*

15th *Panzerdivision* (Gen. Willibald Borowietz) with:
 I/115th *Panzergrenadiere*
 8th *Panzerregiment*
 Piscicelli Arm. group

Army Artillery: 8th regimental group of the Army (17 pieces.)
 Rear Defense (Gen. Giuseppe Costa) with
 Arm. Recon regimental group. *Lodi*
 III Group Arm. *Nizza*
 III Group Arm. *Monferrato*
 Saharan Battalion
 3rd Recon. Bn. German
 30th regimental group coastal art.

The problem, though quite real, was not solved with the meager forces available, at least in the sense of coping with a serious British attempt to develop a consistent tactical operation. It could, at most, as was done, provide vigilant and oppose against small actions of *commandos* and paratroopers designed to create disturbances in the rear. The matter, however, was the subject of no small controversy between the 1st Army Command and the Command of the Army Group, believing the first must first of all ensure the strength of the front, and looking like the second want to ensure the rear even with some front security risk.

He fell to the absolute priority of the Cap Bon peninsula, for which it was provided with artillery and coastal units armored cavalry: Reco *Lodi*, *Nizza* and *Monferrato*. In the days after the measures were extended to all the rear of the army, extending the jurisdiction and responsibilities of the Corps. Each garrison, however small, had to organize themselves in a sector stronghold of 360° against all sources.

In mid-April, the size of the group of armed men was estimated at 200,000 in total: 70,000 Italians and 43,000 Germans for the 1st Army; 34,000 Italians and 18,000 Germans for DAK; 1,800 Italians and 34,000 Germans for the 5th Army. As for aviation, April 15 was dissolved the commands of the 5th Air Fleet and the aeronautical sectors, and replaced by an Air Force Command Tunisia (Gen. Woods), more than enough for the remains of two groups of the 54th fighter Stormo and the two squadrons of MC.200 of the 162nd assault group: around fifty aircraft. The *Fliegerführer*, instead, have available of German 328 aircraft.

Of course it was necessary to adjust also the logistics. On April 15 the delegations of Intendenza of the 1st Army and the XXX Corps were disbanded and the Superintendency in its Italian Tunisia took the entire logistical apparatus as Intendenza of the 1st Army, but with the task of providing for the Italian troops framed within the DAK and in the 5th Army. Of course their dependencies remained unchanged from the Italian-German Intendenza Superior Africa. With the suppression of unnecessary organs were partially remedied the deficiencies in the units and services of the XX and XXI Corps.

On the 16th Kesselring went in the sector of Enfidaville. He had been to the 5th Armored Army and wanted to see the deployment of the 1st Army. Messe had occasion to mention the differences of opinion with von Arnim about the withdraw and about the choice of the position of strength. Field Marshal met with the general; He did not show, however, to agree on the proposal Italian, not so much for positions itself as the lack of depth: a break at any point could have caused the collapse.

The resulting deployment that was shown on the map summarized in a few eloquent data: 90th Light with his four battalions and its two of the *Giovani Fascisti*; the *Giovani Fascisti* with its four battalions

and two of the 90th Light; *Trieste* with its five battalions and one of the *Luftwaffe*; *Pistoia* with its two battalions and two formations of the *Centauro*, 164th Light with its two battalions, one of the 15th *Panzer* and one Italian formation; the *La Spezia* with five battalions in greater part of the formation and one of the 47th *Grenadier*; reserves accumulated by the 15th *Panzer*, at the moment with just *four* tanks and an armored infantry battalion, a battalion of *Pistoia* and two formations of the Air Force; artillery for a total of 250 pieces with a day and a half of fire.

Kesselring approved of what was done and emphasized the task of defense to the bitter end:

"The meeting between the Duce and the Führer - he said - was clearly seen how the Mediterranean situation would be different if Tunisia is no longer ours. In any case, you might never think to remove 300,000 men. And these certainly prefer to fight rather than be captured. The Duce said, reported that everything will be done to send men and materials. Commanders understand, however, that the difficulties have increased"⁽⁸⁾.

Messe said that the order to resist the extreme had a relative value when not followed by the arrival of reinforcements in men, weapons and materials, however assured that the 1st Army would do its duty ⁽⁹⁾.

Just returned to Rome, Kesselring hastened by Mussolini, accompanied by Ambrosio. Overall he was satisfied. According to him the weaknesses were in the north and south-west of Bab el Medjez and the coastal plain to the east of Enfidaville rushed reinforcements arrived and in fact every day something, but in Italy there were 12,000 Germans ready to leave for Africa. By air he had already sent 4-5,000 men, now planned to be able to send 1,800 to 2,000 a day. Perhaps the British attack would be "started on April 20, as a birthday present for Hitler.

Mussolini inquired about morale. The commanders, assured Kesselring, were all fully convinced of the seriousness of the situation and equally determined to fight; morale was good. Here Ambrosio interjected: "*Allow me to observe – he said firmly - that's not true, to me is different.*" And Kesselring eased a little affirmation: "*General Messe had asked me, on my direct question, to report that the troops are tired, but morale is good. Of course, the morale will increase if the troops have the possibility to shoot*"⁽¹⁰⁾.

Messe had drawn conclusions about British intentions. The progressive increase in enemy activity meant the clear imminence of the offensive. The documents captured from radio intercepts and statements of prisoners had made the presence of the 1st Armored Division in the coastal strip to the east of Enfidaville; 2nd New Zealand west of the city and the 7th Armored west of Djebel Garci. Faced with this vacuum it seemed to exist, but it certainly would have been filled at the last

moment. They were considered in the second row the 4th Indian, the 51st *Highlanders* and the 10th Armored, and reordering the 50th Infantry, the 201st *Guards* Brigade and the 22nd Armored Brigade.

Undoubtedly there were uncertainties about the reconstruction, in fact almost daily tweaks were made to the appropriate framework. However it seemed established the concentration of British forces essentially straddling the coast road and in the Djebibina (roughly at the boundary of the eastern sector of the DAK). This made him think that the opponent intends to apply the effort in two places along the coast for the purpose of fixing, and along the Djebibina-Pont du Fahs to contribute to the main action that probably would have been made in the area of Bab el Medjez .

On such basis, Messe merely gave general guidelines: the advanced line, held by some company of the 90th Light and the *Giovani Fascisti*, had to slow the progression enemy without being overwhelmed; the safety zone would rather keep as long as possible, even at the cost to supply it with troops removed the position of strength; the Djebel Garci and Takrouna were the pillars of the defensive position; the concept of defense to - the bitter end, meaning that no commander, of whatever degree, could give the order to retreat without prior and personal approval of the commander of the army.

Then he wanted to be sure of the mood of the troops and went to the XX and XXI Corps commands, where briefed the commanders of division. To tell the truth, did not add anything to the directives issued, but made his presence felt. The only relief that may be in the margin of the two meetings⁽¹¹⁾ covers the difficult task assigned to units in charge of the first resistance on the advanced line (or line Enfidaville for the XX Corp) and in the area of security. It was generally platoons of relative mobility and tactical link very uncertain. Such circumstances would have imposed a very short reins to conduct to prevent untimely setbacks would allow unannounced penetration, but to achieve a similar control of the bout would take means of secure transmission, which did not correspond to reality.

Particular significance was the decision on Takrouna. There he was assigned a battalion of the *Trieste* already illustrious in the desert and that the renewed brilliant behavior on the positions of Mareth and Akarit gave safe custody, a battalion commanded by a splendid officer who in previous months had already earned two silver medals at and the value of the German iron crosses 1st and 2nd class: the I/66th Infantry under Captain Mario Politi. Takrouna should "*resist at any cost, even if everything around is overrun*" had prescribed Messe⁽¹²⁾. The I/66th Inf. was reinforced by section of 65/17 and a 88 war booty, as well as by a platoon of the III/47th *Grenadier*. Inclusion, the latter,

he deliberately wanted to elicit a emotional motivations⁽¹³⁾. Overall, the garrison amounted to 560 men.

Montgomery had studied the line Enfidaville on paper and exposed. He also did make an attempt, aborted, to occupy with momentum a good position. His final thought was that "it was admirably suited to the defense and, if it had not been possible throw out the enemy before he had time to organize in depth, the enterprise to open up a gap was obviously difficult. The ground was generally unsuitable for tanks, except in very narrow coastal strip, which however existed channels and other obstacles. The enemy had excellent observers ruling our land to the south; also there was every indication that it was prepared to resist and to commit a desperate struggle"⁽¹⁴⁾. But, judging from the message that Montgomery sent to Alexander on the 16th: "*All my troops have a very high moral and want to be present at the final Dunkirk ...*"⁽¹⁵⁾, it would appear that in fact, at least before the battle, harbored many hopes to break through.

On April 18, Alexander, who had transferred his command to near Le Kef, devised the program calendar. In the night on 20th the 8th Army was to attack with three divisions in the front row (the British 50th, the 2nd New Zealand and the 4th Indian); 22nd would be the turn of the British 1st Army; the 23rd of the American 2nd Corps.

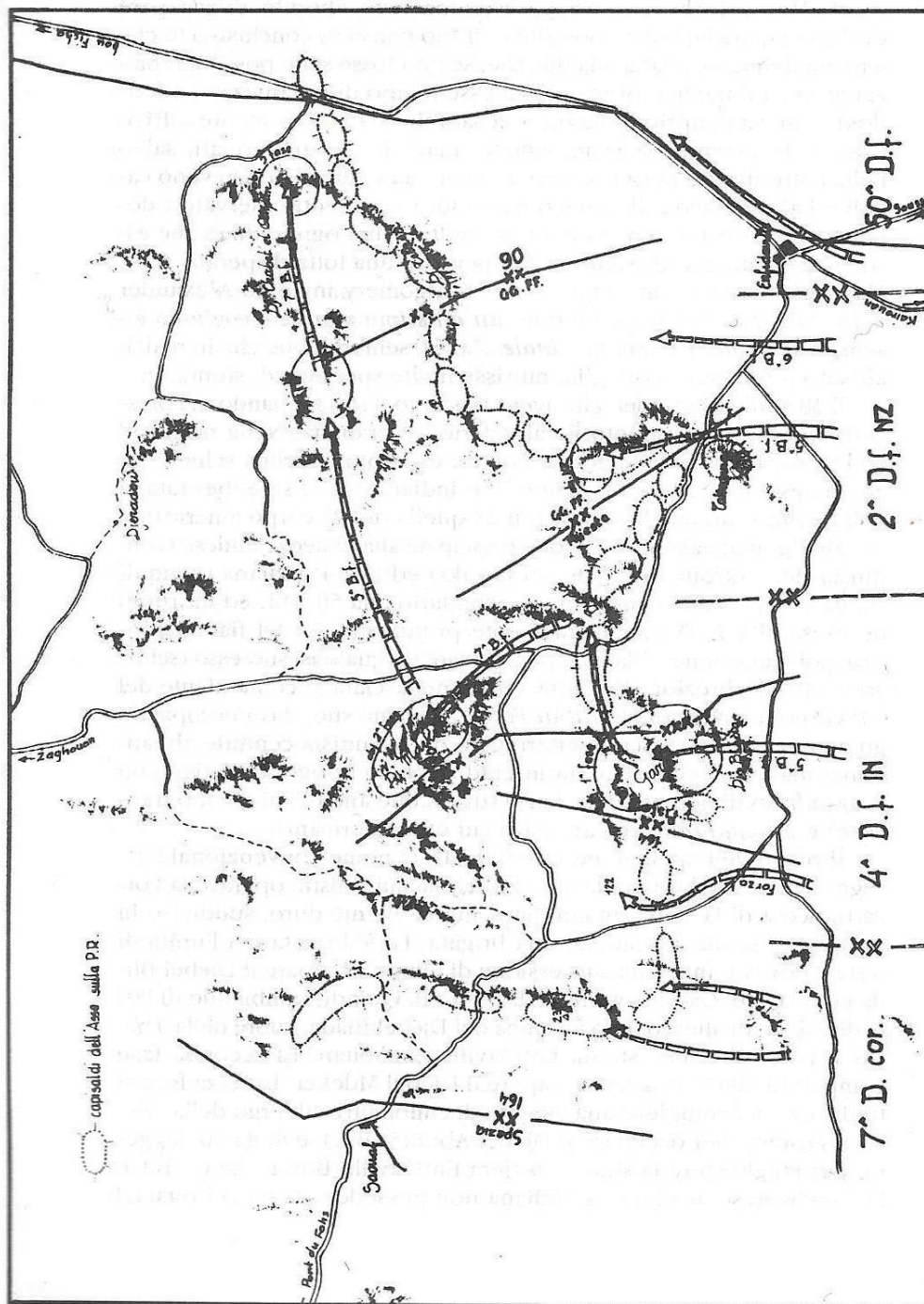
Montgomery gave the main action of the 2nd New Zealand (conquest of Takrouna and Djebel Froukr) and the 4th Indian (conquest of Djebel Garci); an secondary effort to the 50th Inf. Div. and a waiting role to 7th Arm. Div.: initially Protection (?) of the left side, then placing in the struggle to exploit any success (sketch n. 80). The direction of the attack was left to the commander of the 10th Corp. The *Western Desert Air Force*, meanwhile, was working on airports and landing strips of central Tunisia abandoned by the Axis and now was able to bomb every target with 8 squadrons of daytime bombers (two American and one French) and 22 squadrons of fighters (including eight Americans).

The plan for operation *Oration*, that the conventional name assigned to it, provided for the 4th Indian on whose left operated the French Leclerc Force, a hard task individually, broken down into three phases, each assigned to a brigade. The 5th Brigade was the point unit and was in close succession of phases, occupy Djebel Blida and Djebel Garci (the sector of the *Pistoia*). So, changing the direction of attack 90°, seize the Djebel Biada, the heart of *Trieste*, to control the Enfidaville-Zaghouan road. The second phase was competing at the 7th Brigade: occupy Djebel Mdeker. The third phase resulted in making twenty kilometers on the rear of the *Giovani Fascisti*, to occupy the Jebel Abid (5th Inf. Bd.), and the 90th Light, to reach the coastal road Enfidaville-Bou Fichta (7th Inf. Bd.). Keep in mind that the 4th Indian did not have the third brigade.

The attack plan of the British 10th Corps on the Enfidaville

Schizzo n. 80

IL PIANO DI ATTACCO DEL 10° CORPO BRITANNICO
ALLA LINEA DI ENFIDAVILLE



As for the 2nd New Zealander, the deployment adopted by Freyberg leaves also perplexed: his two brigades (the third being still unavailable) were to proceed more or less side by side along two parallel lines (sketch n. 81). Each was reinforced by a regiment of the 8th Arm. Bd. But the 5th Brigade of Gen. Kippenberger, following the tactical hilly path, would have to take over before Takrouna and then behind the Djebel el Froukr, both expected to be well defended, where the 6th of Gen. Gentry, who was advancing in full plain, not only would not have found the land difficult, but even resistance of relief because forward in the area of security. Evidently basing the calculation on the commitment of the 5th brigade, the two phases in which the operation was marked not result in very limited depth of targets. On balance it does seem doubtful that there is a mixture of overconfidence and underestimation of the Italian 1st Army. "*The eyes of those who planned* - has been rightly observed - *they were not fixed on Takrouna or Djebel Garci*", but "*the Djebel Proukr or Djebel Mdeker*" that is far ⁽¹⁶⁾.

At 23:00 of the 19th started the pounding of fire preparation on Garci and the Takrouna -Enfidaville stretch, but already for an hour patrols of the 164th Light and *Trieste* signaled the advance of the Indian battalions and New Zealand. Once again the Italian artillery waited to intervene the enemy, can not afford the luxury of an expensive counter preparation; on the other hand, the broadcasts network essentially worked well.

The action took place in the name of New Zealand's difficulties. The 5th Inf. Bd. had two battalions in the first group, both reinforced: the 21st against the south west side of Takrouna, defended by I/66th Inf. of the *Trieste*, and the 28th *Maori* against Djebel Bir, held by a company of the III/47th *Grenadier*. This achieved, the *Maori* had to turn to the north or east against Takrouna. The 23rd Battalion was instructed to pass through the 28th and occupy first Djebel Cherachir and then Djebel Froukr. The 6th Inf. Bd. It had a much simpler task: occupy Djebel Ogla and expand in a semicircle westward, consolidating its success. Started on: 23:00 hours of 19 April. The fire support was secured by 168 pieces.

News that reached Kippenberger during the night was not comforting. The *Maori* is fully committed and the losses were sensitive; the 21st Battalion "*had been heavily worn and appeared seriously disorganized. It became clear that it would not reach the goal in any way*" ⁽¹⁷⁾. Under the circumstances, Kippenberger was forced to recall the 21st limiting their contribution to a contest on the western side of Takrouna, and to rely on the positive outcome of the ongoing effort on the right, where he had put the 23rd battalion and a tank squadron.

Between 05:00 and 07:00 of the 20th the commander of the XX Corps had a sufficiently comprehensive, although not very reassuring. Djebel

Schizzo n. 81

Ogla had fallen into the hands of New Zealand (6th Inf. Bd.) and in this way it was granted, being in the security zone; but the worst was about the garrison of Djebel Bir, also overwhelmed by New Zealand (5th Inf. Bd.). Outset the cornerstone of Takrouna had suffered the consequences of his position very tactically advanced: to connect in some way with the cornerstones side arrears of Djebel Bir and hill 136 (holding that the battalion of the *Luftwaffe*), Capt. Politi had put a company on the eastern slopes to oversee backgrounds from Djebel Bir, the easier to climb the relief; higher up the hillside and facing north, he had moved to another company; Finally, higher still, on the southern and western he had laid the last company. To guard the summit was intended a platoon of German Grenadiers.

Now, the loss of Djebel Bir led the way on the street more dangerous tactic. And on this very soon occurred infiltration. Around 08:00 a unit of *Maori* and a group of 23rd Battalion were able to infiltrate into the gorge of the cornerstone, reaching, although decimated, the summit, where an Arab tomb and some stony buildings allowed a very solid foothold. Informed of the incident, Gen. La Ferla established to strengthen the Takrouna first with the III/66th Inf. (Actually two companies of paratroopers the *Folgore*) and then the II/66th Inf. (Actually just a company of Grenadiers), held in divisional reserve.

Worse things were in the area of the *Pistoia*. The attack of the Indian 5th Inf. Bd. - starting an hour and a half ahead of the New Zealanders because of the difficulty of the planned tactical routes - it was directed against the Djebel Blida supported by a powerful artillery fire. Nevertheless, the progression was very hard and only around 04:00 in the morning the Indians managed to get the better of the defenders, resisting even the avid counter assault. The line held by the small 340th Machine Gun Battalion, by the III *Novara* group and a platoon of the *Lodi* was broken.

Berardi struggled somewhat to obtain a complete picture of the events, but apparently most of the static structures was skipped and this required it to run for cover. First he bothers to plug the leak by inserting between 340th Machine Gun Battalion and *Novara* the few sector reinforcements, and that is a company of the I/35th Inf. and the German 280th Recon Bn. Then he thought to restore the initial situation since launching the scrapped together counterattack: the II/433rd *Panzergradiere*, the I and the II/35th Inf. (Although freshly reconstituted) and III/36th Inf. of the *Pistoia*. Actually, Berardi seemed unconvinced of being able to revamp the line, so as to suggest a correction more to the rear, but Messe sharply rejected the proposal.

However, preparations for the reaction took place with the promptness desired, so that when, about noon, he realized the impending ordeal, Gen. Tucker did not hesitate to pursue the 7th Brigade and call the fire all the artillery he could count on:

eight field regiments and three of medium caliber.

For the whole afternoon they followed the efforts to restore the situation. The Djebel Garci fighting took place with mixed results, but dusk positions were largely on balance back in possession of the *Pistoia*. On Takrouna reinforcements flowed dedicated themselves to the reconquest of the summit while the original garrison fought at the foot of the hill. The bitterness of the fighting was heard on both sides. Freyberg was "*rather upset*" when Kippenberger told him that losses approaching to 400 men, and promised to pass the 25th battalion of the 6th Brigade. All in all, however, could be said to be satisfied. Djebel Ogla was busy, the Djebel Bir, on the summit of Takrouna he had placed on foot a group of *Maori*, they had captured 380 prisoners, including 120 Germans. Apart from this, he had to admit that "*Italians were the 'Trieste' and in general had fought surprisingly well. All resistance was still on the front of the 5th Brigade*" ⁽¹⁸⁾.

By April 21 he ended the operation *Oration*. While the New Zealand divisional cavalry pushed to patrol north of Enfidaville and artillery resumed shelling the cornerstones of the *Trieste* and the *Giovani Fascisti*, Freyberg held at dawn a meeting to decide how to end the deal. The bulk of the 8th Arm. Bd. was sent to the west to test the central section of the front of the *Trieste*; 5th Inf. Bd., received a reinforced battalion, to resume the attempt to seize Takrouna.

For La Ferla things got bad, especially for a difficult to impossible to overcome: scarce ammunition. For the artillery, remained half *unfoc* per pieces, silent or fired with extreme dosage of shots. The I/66th was with the water in the throat. At 14:15 Capt. Politi pointed out:

"Situation critical, desperate. We fired the last cartridge. The losses are huge. The enemy has occupied almost all positions. A lot of enemy infantry that always increases. Below are many tanks. Situation hopeless. Do quickly. Do quickly."

Orlando had received from the Commander of the Army the 103rd Assault company (eighty men). He sent it on Takrouna hoping to arrive at your destination, but for ammunition there was nothing to do (one wonders: if the cornerstone had been provided with food and ammunition in quantities commensurate to the task of resistance to the bitter end and the difficulty of supply?). Then he thought for a counterattack with the 15th *Panzer*, who the day before Messe had approach in order to intervene in the areas of the *Pistoia* or *Trieste*, as needed. The idea was to strike with the 8th *Panzerregiment* and the Piscicelli group against Djebel Ogla and the 115th *Panzergranadier* against Djebel Bir. Except that, looking at the actual texture of the two regiments mentioned, we realized to be about thirty vehicles

and a skimpy armored battalion. Messe not bring himself to play that way the only modest armored reserves, because it would be dangerous to pretend that Takrouna could last long. Ultimately, it was accepted the provision for adjustment of the front able to connect on the Djebel Cherachir two wings of the *Trieste* and the *Giovane Fascisti*.

At Djebel Garci neither side knew of the troubles of the opponent. The repeated counter attacks of the *Pistoia* did not come to full restoration of the resistance line and the 4th Indian struggle sustained until then appeared "*the most unpleasant affair in two and a half years of savage fighting*"⁽¹⁹⁾. The situation stabilized leaving Djebel Blida to the Indians.

Von Arnim went to Messe that morning had made a tour to visit Orlando and Berardi, and expressed the hope to hold out until the morning of the 23rd. In his view, after a further 36 hours of hard struggle the British would be forced to quit the game because of heavy losses. He made to agreed; but he wanted to highlight the consequences of the likely fall of Takrouna. Set aside the idea of using the 15th *Panzer* prematurely, the possibility remained purely theoretical, resuming Djebel Bir with a small battle group subtracted the 90th Light. However, the action is not easy given the presence loomed in place of a lot of enemy infantry, it could not be carried out until the next morning, April 22, and was linked to the condition that the Takrouna was still standing. Apart from that, it would be then the question arose of how to guard firmly regained Djebel Bir. A small drop of the local position of strength in the event of failure of Takrouna, was the only alternative: should not be alarmed because in the end the change would respect the line indicated originally from Army Group. Von Arnim formulated one objection: if the measure had been adopted before the 23rd, the enemy would have received a feeling of success. It was absolutely necessary to hold up a little:

"I firmly believe - he said - that we will have gained a lot of time if we will gain another two days. We will then have time to regroup because the enemy will have to waste so much time to reorganize around a new attack.

This is truly a war of fortitude and also the British if they are convinced. Every day that we resist more is a day gained for the defense of Europe. And every bomb thrown in Africa is less than falls on Europe. I hope that even the simplest soldier to understand it" ⁽²⁰⁾.

Meanwhile he would try to send the Grenadier Regiment of Africa, that of just five companies gave much reliance, and to reinforce the battalion of the *Luftwaffe*.

In the afternoon the assault company sent as reinforcement to Takrouna came back: he was not able to overcome the tight blockade to relive the siege. Shortly after, at 17:00, the radio of the I/66th Inf. transmitted

the last warning and the cornerstone was considered lost. After a struggle that lasted long hours, Kippenberger decided to attack the village of Takrouna from late evening. But around 20:00 saw suddenly cease the residual resistance⁽²¹⁾. Commented later: "*These Italians who had reached the breaking point fought really well; They were paratroopers Folgore division and northern Trieste and Sardinia [sic] with a good reinforcement of the Germans in 104th Panzergrenadier*"⁽²²⁾.

Now for the 1st Army they are imposed appropriate measures. Gen. Borowietz was therefore responsible for organizing, within the framework of the XX Corps, a diaphragm alignment Djebel Biada (82nd Complements Battalion) - Djebel Debouaa (X Bersaglieri Battalion.) - Djebel Tine (I/115th Panzergrenadier). At his disposal was also placed the II/47th Grenadier taken from a sector of the Spezia clearly above the fray. Gen. Imperiali took command of the army reserve formed with the 5th Bersaglieri and the *Duke of Aosta*.

April 22 was a day veiled by doubt and mistrust on both sides. Messe is expecting a recovery offensive, not so much in terms of the *Trieste* and the *Giovani Fascisti*, who seemed well clinging to the ground, as in the area of *Pistoia*, widely worn and more with tactical problems connecting with the 164th Light. The real fear was generated by the assumption that in this stretch had been inserted the 51st *Highlanders*. The morning passed between local disputes, threatening apparitions of British tanks and artillery duels. In the afternoon Messe realized that the opponent had stopped. Just in time. Was recent communication to von Arnim that the persistence of the enemy attack, supported by an inexhaustible support of artillery, had literally consumed the battalions of the *Pistoia* and absorbed the meager army reserves. That being the case, it became predictable the emergence of dramatic circumstances. -was Also a true cry of anguish - "*the ammunition situation dictates that from Italy during the 23rd tomorrow arrive in absolutely new quantitative to Africa, without which artillery would come into irreparable crisis. Please solicit from Rome sent by any quantitative means I have already requested directly*"⁽²³⁾.

The successful stasis, Messe gave notice to the Comando Supremo, reporting losses: I, II and III/66th Inf. to Takrouna; II and III/36th Inf., 340th machine gun and the *Novara* group at Djebel Garci. The Germans had lost a couple of battalions. He had to immediately reorder unit, which really deserved praise. Messe issued an agenda of recognition and even von Arnim added his, but the latter, in all frankness, aroused more criticism than satisfaction by the Italians⁽²⁴⁾. Both sides could boast of the courage and determination shown. Gen. Horrocks was later to say that he considered the conquest of Takrouna as the most brilliant feat of arms which was witnessed in the whole course of the war⁽²⁵⁾.

The "*Soldiers Battle*", as they called the New Zealanders, meant the end of the operation *Oration*. No denying it: for the British ended with substantial failures. Montgomery acknowledged it reluctantly and was persuaded that a breakthrough through the hilly area looked extremely problematic and equally expensive. Moreover, the 50th Inf. Div. had to go back to Egypt to regroup ahead of the landing in Sicily. Just to make something he decided to move the center of gravity of the attack in the coastal strip, aiming to turn defenses from the east.

For the new plan Horrocks had available the 4th Indian, the 2nd New Zealand and 56th British, coming overland from Iraq and which at the time had arrived only the 169th Inf. Bd. His idea is not very convinced, and was not liked even by Freyberg and Taker. On the other hand, objectively, there was little hope of opening up in the rich soil of holds, reiterating *Oration*. "*The fact is - he looked annoyed - that there is no battle to be won in these parts*"⁽²⁶⁾. While the 51st *Highlanders* was preparing to take over from the 4th Indian and from the 2nd New Zealand at Takrouna Djebel Garci and were preparing troops for an attempt to be taken more to the east, Montgomery flew to Cairo, where they held the conference of Chiefs of G.S for Operation *Husky*.

From this time, part of the 8th army against the Italian 1st Army faded and the modest local activity resulted in unnecessary wear and tear. An attack of the New Zealand 6th Inf. Bd. in the night on the 25th against the two outposts of Djebel es Srafi (a company of the *I Giovani Fascisti* Battalion) and Djebel Terhouna (a company of Bersaglieri) managed to get only a temporary success canceled by a violent Italian counterattack. A place held by a platoon of the 9th Independent Battalion on Djebel es Hamadet Sourrah, where he had committed the 201st *Guards* Inf. Bd., was instead overrun. Note that these outposts were not on the position of strength, but in the security zone where Orlando's intention to apply an elastic defense, and therefore an enemy affirmation even if complete would not lead to significant results. However it was an erroneous detection of the position of the Italian or the need to prepare the next move or the one and the other thing together, for several days the safety zone of the *Giovani Fascisti* became the field of frequent clashes, without the New Zealanders getting anything concrete. Essentially, it was a veritable no man's land; as the Italians could not garrison it permanently without being subject to continuous losses given the freedom of movement granted by the ground to enemy armored vehicles, which is why it was decided the use of patrols with task disturbance and observation. For their part, the British were unable to settle on the heights occupied because subjected to precise fire of the artillery of the army. "*The three weeks that followed the conquest of Takrouna* - reads the official New Zealand report -

they were of the most irritating and frustrating ever spent by the 2nd New Zealand Division"
(27).

The plan Horrocks provided the following schedule:

- Night on April 27: the withdrawal of the 2nd New Zealand into the second line.
- Night on April 29: the conquest of Djebel Srafi and Djebel Terhouna by the 56th Inf. Div., preliminary compared to the next action;
- Night on April 30: Attack of the 56th Inf. Div. and the 4th Indian Inf. Div. to achieve meridian alignment Djebel Mengoub (56th Inf. Div.) -Djebel Tebaga (4th Indian) - coast. The operation was called *Cholera*;
- On the night of May: withdrawal of the 4th Indian into the second line and expansion of the front of the 56th Inf. Div. to the sea;
- Night on May 2: passing through the 56th Inf. Div. by the 4th Indian and the 2nd New Zealander to break through the positions straddling the coast and to ensure the completion of the success of Hammamet with the 7th Arm. Div. (Operation *Accomplish*)⁽²⁸⁾.

Overnight on the 27th the 169th Brigade (Gen. Lynne) replaced the New Zealanders and to give them ease to downgrade pushed against the Italian positions obtaining such a reaction fire from being forced to suspend the unrealistic attempt. The night on the 29th entered the lists also the 167th Brigade (Gen. Birch), just arrived in Tunisia. The intent was to conquer the Djebels Srafi and Terhouna, except the initial success of 56th Inf. Div. (Gen. Miles) was reversed in the morning of the 29th, when in Gen. Boselli launched a strong counterattack that repulsed the British back in great disorder.

Messe and Montgomery were both very thoughtful. The first, while happy for the shining behavior of troops -which did not stop to make some remarks on the work of commanders at various levels⁽²⁹⁾ - saw with growing concern the future. The German 5th Army was fully engaged and its difficulties frightened, forcing von Arnim to loot the Italian 1st Army. As of April 26 it had ceded 5th Bersaglieri⁽³⁰⁾, the 900th Pioneers Battalion. of the 90th Light, all the armored units of the 15th *Panzer* (ie 14 German tanks, 12 Italians and 12 semoventi by 75/18), 3rd and 33rd Recon. Bn., two Italian groups of 100/17 and one of 149/40 two batteries of 100, a German 170 and a 240⁽³¹⁾. On the 27th was the turn of the III/47th *Panzergranadier*. The Italian divisional strength in the line on 28 April, in the end, it turned out the following: *Giovani Fascisti* 176 officers and 3,400 noncommissioned officers and troops; *Trieste* respectively 102 and 2,200; *Pistoia* 109 and 2,090; *Spezia* 103 and 2,400. The artillery of the XX Corps in possession of 18 pieces, that of the XXI of just 7! Messe turned to the Comando Supremo for help: "*It is therefore evident that no influx organic battalions or at least complement, large units are preceding rapidly to complete exhaustion*"⁽³²⁾.

He did not know that between the 18th and 22nd, another hundred transport aircraft had been destroyed by Allied air forces, however, he could no longer have any illusions.

The attitude of Montgomery is difficult to understand. On one hand, just back from Egypt urged to break through the Italian lines, given the importance of the stakes, and informed Alexander that aimed to bring three or four divisions in the triangle Hammamet-Bou Ficha-Marie du Zit and adjust then depending on the circumstances; secondly, called Horrocks to the feeling of a lack of confidence in an effort in the coastal strip. For Horrocks did not exist doubts: everything depended on the success that the Army of Anderson would return to the north and that would make it almost useless a costly victory of the 8th Army ⁽³³⁾.

However, the misadventures of the 56th Inf. Div. if only they led to a clarification of the situation. On the afternoon of the 29th Montgomery shared with Alexander that the division in question had little experience of war and that, all things considered, he was "*not at all satisfied with the plan to end this affair*" ⁽³⁴⁾. Finding it appropriate to discuss in a general way, he asked for an interview the next day.

Alexander had sent to Anderson that day a new directive for the continuation of his offensive. The he stopped immediately as soon as received the message of Montgomery and accepted the appointment. In the conversation, which took place at 7:30 am on the 30th, the commander of the 8th Army was explicit in seeing little chance of a favorable outcome for the attempt at the turn of the coast, and to propose the abandonment of the operation. Alexander probably from the beginning had some doubts about it. Moreover, he found that, despite the harshness of the battle and the attrition of the workforce, the Italian 1st Army had been able to give to the German 5th, the few armored units at its disposal without suffering apparent consequences. Now, having heard the reports on the fighting, he formed the opinion that "*Italians fought particularly well, better than the Germans that they were in line with them*" ⁽³⁵⁾. So it was soon decided.

The 8th Army would take, said Montgomery, a task of fixing and would transfer immediately to the exuberant forces to meet that goal: the 4th Indian, 7th Armored and the 201st *Guards* Brigade, the original core of the *Western Desert Force* of 1940. At the same time Horrocks was going to replace the Gen. Crocker, wounded, in command of the 9th Corps and Freyberg temporarily took over at the helm of the 10th Corps.

Messe that day saw the start of Gen. Borowietz with the command of the 15th *Panzer*, the I and II/115th *Panzer*grenadier, the last units of the division and a group of 88. reworked once the deployment and transmitted to the Comando Supremo of the report on the battle:

"The 1st Army writes among other things -would have today possibility of new assertions for its technical content and spiritual (...). But the army marching rapidly towards exhaustion. For some time our major units are replenished from time to time at best, drawing on the remains of other large units dissolved; after Mareth disbanded and incorporated into the ranks regimental also all the little independent units, but now even this source is exhausted, at which it is drawn without reluctance, knowing that renewal through these remnants of units privately undermines efficient qualitative of our units, because there is no doubt that the battle removes from time to time the best.

But if this can not be remedied, we will continue to fight as in the past, no wonder so many of us in front of the enemy" ⁽³⁶⁾.

Yet another reorganization which Messe proceeded was based on AS 42 organization for infantry regiments and the dissolution of all the independent units that still exist. Following this address, the divisions took the following formations from 1 May:

Giovani Fascisti Inf. Div.:

Giovani Fascisti Regt. with I and II battalion;
8th Bersaglieri with X, XI and LVII battalion.

Trieste Inf. Div.:

65th Infantry with I and III battalion and a 81 mm. mortars co.;
66th Infantry with I, II and III battalion and a 81 mm. mortars co.

Spezia Inf. Div.:

125th Infantry with I and II battalion and a 81 mm. mortars co.;
126th Infantry with I, II and III battalion and a 81 mm. mortars co.

Pistoia Inf. Div.:

35th Infantry with of I and II battalion and a 81 mm. mortars co.;
36th Infantry with of I and III battalion and a 81 mm. mortars co.

3. ALLIED OFFENSIVE ON THE WESTERN FRONT.

On April 18, the Axis westward front was held by the 5th *Panzerarmee* between the coast and the Djebel Mansour including and the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* between this and the road Djebibina-Pont du Fahs included. As we know, as the rank of such units was high, in fact available troops were reduced to few divisions very heterogeneous, with fierce units but exhausted and sufficiently organic units but low training level ⁽³⁷⁾.

The 5th *Panzerarmee* of von Vaerst fielded, from the north, the division von Manteuffel at Mateur, the 334th Inf. Div. of Gen. Weber in the sector of Tebourba, the *Hermann Goering* of Gen. Schmid at Pont du Fahs. Also there was the 999th Inf. Bd. ⁽³⁸⁾, whose commander had crashed with his aircraft during the flight to Tunisia, whose Command

had never been organized and whose units (961st and 962nd infantry and 999th artillery) were used to reinforce the various divisions. The reserve was limited to the 10th *Panzer* of Gen. von Broich reinforced.

The DAK of Cramer presided over the salient squarely barring guidelines alleging south to Pont du Fahs. Two thirds of this period were defensive entrusted to *Superga* of Gen. Gelich, the rest of the 21st *Panzer*, now commanded by Colonel. Lang instead of Gen. Hildebrandt.

It's hard to judge what was the most dangerous section of the entire front; Certainly, however, the salient question to fear any penetration toward Pont du Fahs from Bou Arada (area of the *Hermann Goering*) as Enfidaville (the area of the Italian 1st Army), so any retrograde movement of DAK would cause dangerous alterations in the large side units. In the same time, the nature distinctly hilly the area allowed the use of substantial support points.

According to the directives of Alexander, Gen. Anderson got in conditions to launch his major offensive on April 22. From the day of the 12th had started the movement intended to develop the deployment wanted. Of these, the most significant was undoubtedly the transfer of about 90,000 men of the American 2nd Corp from Central Tunisia to the North and the simultaneous replacement of two British divisions. It was accomplished with two streams of traffic through the 250 km in the rear of the British 1st Army. The first group, composed of the 1st and the 9th Inf. Div, was ready for the set date; the second, formed by the 34th Inf. Div. and the 1st Arm. Div., did not begin to arrive in the new sector that as of the 22nd, so at first remained in reserve (see. the order of the battle below).

The design of Anderson, exposed via short in a meeting held on the morning of April 18 and stated in the order of operations issued the next day, was not based on strong action suggested by more than obvious superiority, but on careful analysis the land and the assessment of the defensive line of the Axis. The most direct access route to Tunis and the most appropriate use of armored vehicles was the valley of Medjerda, but was strongly defending. The second crossing an area of limited practicability and put forward the objective with the direction of Medjez Bab el-Massicault, but of no great potential of higher returns because presumably little considered by the enemy and poorly manned. The third outlet was allowed by the threshold of Bou Arada, which opened the direction of Pont du Fahs- Tunis, as long preceded the conquest of his flanks: the high ground to the west of Sebkret el Kourzia and Djebel Mansour.

Ultimately, Anderson's plan foresaw effort on the main direction of Medjez Bab el-Massicault with 5th Corps of Allfrey; a

ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE ALLIED FORCES IN NORTHERN TUNISIA	
Commander of the British 1 st Army: Gen. Kenneth A. Anderson Chief of the G.S. Gen. J.S. Nichols	
5 th Corps British (Gen. C. W. Allfrey) with:	
1 st Inf. Div. (Gen. W.E. Clutterbuck)	
4 th Inf. Div. (Gen. J.L.I. Hawkesworth)	
78 th Inf. Div. (Gen. V. Eveleigh)	
25 th Arm. Bd. (Gen. R. H. Maxwell)	
9 th Corps British (Gen. J.T. Crocker) with:	
1 st Arm. Div. (Gen. R. Briggs)	
6 th Arm. Div. (Gen. C. F. Keightley)	
46 th Inf. Div. (Gen. HAS. Freeman-Attwood)	
51 st R.T.R. (Lt. Col. R.B. Holden)	
19 th Army Corps French (Gen. L.M. Koeltz) with:	
Inf. Div. of Aigeri (Gen. Conne)	
Inf. Div. of Morocco (Gen. Mathenet)	
Inf. Div. of Oran. (Gen. R. Boissau)	
Arm. Regimental Group. (Gen. Le Couteulx)	
1 st King's Dragoon Guards (Lt. Col. M.J. Lindsay)	
2 nd Corps American (Gen. O.N. Bradley) with:	
1 st Inf. Div. (Gen. T. Allen)	
9 th Inf. Div. (Gen. M.S. Eddy)	
3 rd Inf. Div. (Gen. C. W. Ryder)	
1 st Arm. Div. (Gen. E.N. Harmon)	
French Corps of Africa (Col. Magnan)	

Subsidiary but strong effort on the right by the 9th Corps of Crocker with the task of occupying with the infantry the heights of Sebkret el Kourzia and turn from the south with armored units the Massicault sector. These two actions, and not just the Army Command had determined the concentration of German reserves against the impact of the 5th Corps, they had to adjust the two wings: the 2nd Corps of Bradley with an attack along the Mateur-Beja and the 9th of Koeltz for the elimination of all obstacles to the opening of the direction of Pont du Fahs- Tunis, namely Djebel Mansour and Djebel Douamess (sketch n. 82).

Schizzo n. 82

[illegible]

Between 13 and April 22, therefore, the four Allied Corps affected in the offensive, the US was engaged in logistical problem of transfer from the center to the far left of the front; the British were confined to prepare, except for some local action; French instead was forced to a far from irrelevant preliminary operations.

The retreat of the XXX Corp of Sogno north of the pass of Sidi Salah (or H. Karachoum) had imposed a similar rotation to the French, made with the most quickly as possible in order to prevent -but really Koeltz had hoped to precede - the Italian firm occupation of Djebels Chirich and Zaress. It was above all to the right of the Mathenet division, 7th Moroccan *Tirailleurs* and 1st *Tabors* group of Leblanc, who quickened his pace and some results, even though the passengers, achieved it.

Gelich was organizing his positions as best he could in a confusing succession of orders and news ⁽³⁹⁾. The withdrawal of all the units of Gen. Benigni on the rear of the *Superga* ⁽⁴⁰⁾ was for him absolutely unexpected novelty and a safe alternative to the intentions of Sogno:

"I ignored completely - wrote in his report - by their orders, which troops would remain in the area to my left and who would assume command. I just knew that there was a general Imperiali, but the German Connection officer (Lt. Col. Stolz) told me that a "sector Imperiali " was not known (*unbekannt*), the DAK intended to occupy the sector with the same troops, taking its orders even those of the XXX Corps that were there. On the other hand, orders and directives, especially for the artillery, arrived to me and to General Forum, also predicted by the Corp command. "

On the morning of the 13th the movements could be regarded as completed, except for the III/91st Inf. who, exhausted by the long march, pressed by the *Tabors* group and having already lost three rearguard platoons was beginning to arrive. So it was that the attack, carried on the momentum, the *Tabors* swept the III/91st Inf. The German A-22 battalion and in the course of installation, forcing them into a dangerous and messy leap backwards. The intervention of the smv. A/T. battalion first and then the I/91st Inf. managed to block the raid and to bring the line on Djebel Fartoute. The next day, April 14, was to be taken a second step sweeping the opponent in front of the point of resistance, except for the 7th Moroccan *Tirailleurs* and the 1st *Tabors* group attacked again and firmly seizing Djebel Sefsouf and Djebel Fartoute. Italian losses were heavy: a company Tunisian volunteers almost destroyed, the I/91st Inf. (Which, however, was reduced to a reinforced company with 81 mm. mortars and 47/32 mm. guns) the same, III/91st Inf. heavily worn and shaken.

Because since the previous afternoon Gelich had asked Sogno to send him the II/91st Inf., The CXXXVI A/T battalion and LXV group of 100/17, in the late evening it became possible to stem the enemy infiltration

and the 15th, with the arrival of reinforcements solicited by the DAK German liaison officer - the I and II/69th *Panzergrénadier* the 10th *Panzer* and the I and II II/961st Infantry of the 999th Inf. Bd. - The French attack was repulsed with a series of tough fights.

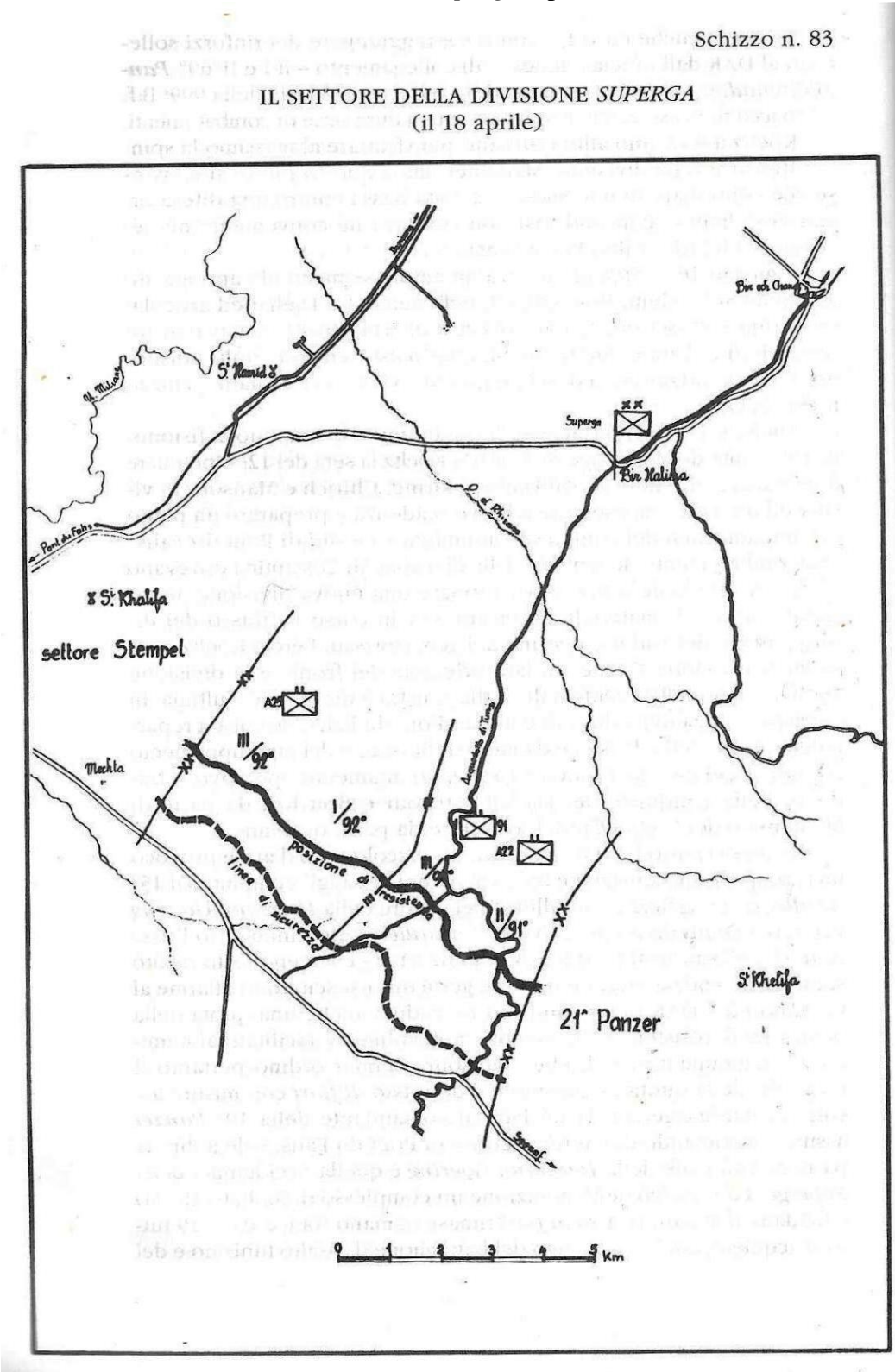
Koeltz had hitherto insisted to make the most of the offensive thrust with the division Mathenet, but at this point he became convinced that continue in a headlong action against a defense now visibly consolidated was not neither convenient nor necessary. So he ordered the suspension.

On the 16th the Superga held a wide semicircle supported by Djebel Sidi Salem, Bou Kril, Chirich, Sefsouf and Djehaf and divided into two sub-sectors. To the west (Col. Dispensa) he counted on three Italian and two German battalions; the east (Lt. Col. Stoltz) had six German battalions and four Italian battalions (sketch No. 83) ⁽⁴¹⁾.

The French 19th Corp were taking a new look as a result of the directives received from Koeltz the evening of the 12th "reconnecting with the enemy on the Djebel Fkirine, Chirich Mansour and in view of the offensive to be carried out in the short term and prepare a plan to take over the mountainous complex south of Pont du Fahs" ⁽⁴²⁾. In addition, while the infantry of the Constantine Division had to be sent to the rear to form a new motorized division with American materials, was being the influx of the detachment of south-east of Algeria of Gen. Boissau. Therefore Koeltz retained the Conne division on the eastern side of the front and the Mathenet division of the West. On the left and behind the latter, at the direction-Robaa Pont du Fahs, collected the units of newly-formed Grano Division of Boissau and the armor of Gen. Couteulx ⁽⁴³⁾. The resulting operational order for the conquest of Djebel Bou Mansour and Kril by Mathenet and Djebel Chirich and Fkirine by Conne.

In this period of preparation, a small feat of arms provoked a disproportionate German reaction. Some "sampling" taken by the 15th Senegalese *Tirailleurs* toward Alliliga in the *Hermann Goering* sector were followed by an attack of the 6th Algerian *Tirailleurs* against the *Ace of clubs*, a advanced defensive structure III/91st Inf., Which soon be overrun. Inaccurate Germanic news source aroused alarm in command of the DAK because fall indicated a share of the position of strength that would have greatly facilitated the enemy circumvention of Djebel Mansour. Cramer therefore ordered the recovery of the height and the *Ace of clubs* with measures greatly exaggerated on the one hand (the commander of the 10th *Panzer* took command of the entire sector of Pont du Fahs, namely the southern part of the *Hermann Goering* and western parts of the *Superga*, and commissioned the operation group of three battalions) and on the other hand the unsuitable (the *Ace of clubs* remained in French hands). On the 19th everything calmed down, although the arrival of the Tunisian assault battalion and

The sector of *Superga* April 18



Versé machine gun battalion, coming from the sector of the 21st *Panzer* ⁽⁴⁴⁾, and the need to recover the I/69th *Panzergrnadier* destined elsewhere, led to various movements in the deployment.

Gelich biting the brake, but not only for the inclusion of messy units in the position of strength. Resented the east sub sector was ruled by a German Lt. Colonel, while his side the commander of 91st Infantry "took care of" the Italian troops. Not to mention Gen. Benigni, who had no tactical employment. Taking advantage of the short break and the withdrawal of units of the 10th *Panzer*, he went to Cramer and finally got the east sub-sector passed to Col. Benigni, commander of the 91st Infantry, from the morning of the 23rd. While he was in place a more careful and systematic reorganization of the positions, with on the 18:00 of the 24th Gelich was ordered to fall back to the division "in the night on the 25th" over the carriage Saouaf-Pont du Fahs. Start the movement at 21:00.

The decision had been taken lightly by von Arnim, was derived from the threat posed by the British 9th Corps north of Pont du Fahs, as described below (see sketch No. 84). Cramer had also rearranged the defense. To the right was the *Kampfgruppe* Stempel with parts of the *Hermann Goering* and 10th *Panzer*, at the center the *Superga*, left the 21st *Panzer* now entrusted to Col. Schmidt instead of Col. Lang, returned with some urgency ⁽⁴⁵⁾. Now the operational measures were taken under the initiative of the opponent and the general climate of orders on the drum not wonder much the occurrence of failures and the resulting recriminations. Even this setback will not go free.

The depth of the displacement ranged from 25 to 45 km and, thanks to a careful study already made on its behalf by Gelich, It could be covered in good order, although the vehicles sent from XXX Corps - who still lived a strange existence - and by the Intendenza obviously could not show up with timely request. The French were not aware of the abandonment of the positions.

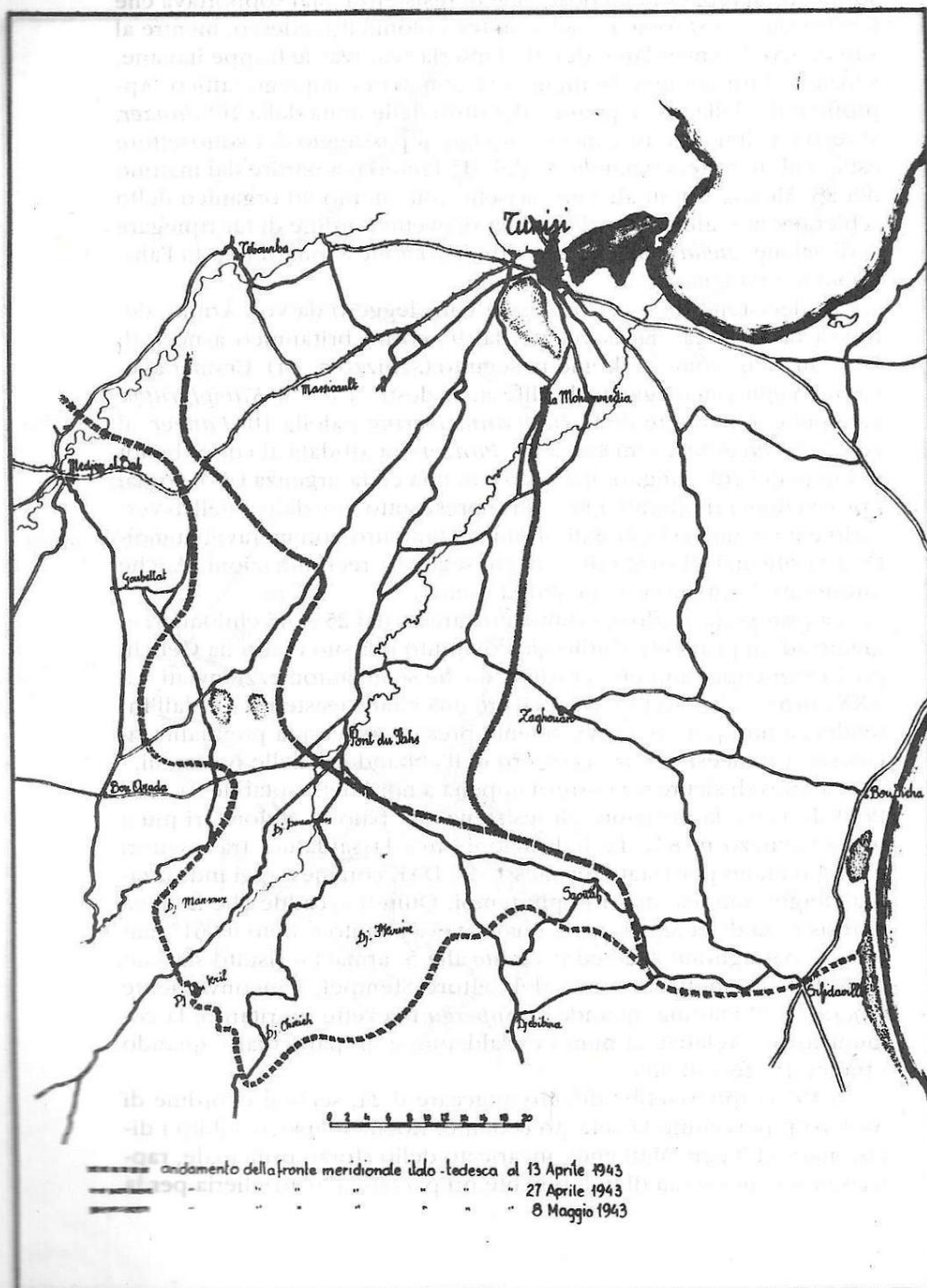
The security line was running just north of the Saouaf-Pont du Fahs roadway; the position of strength a few kilometers further on the back (sketch n. 85). The indications about the joining of the adjacent sectors were, however, been received from DAK with messages addressed to the interested parties and in several stages. So it happened that the resistance line of *Superga* - which had meanwhile ceded the 961st Infantry, the A-28 battalion and the *Grado* to the 5th Army - turned staggered backwards compared to that for Stempel sector. The problem emerged the morning of the 28th, when the *Superga* received, late, the communication relating to the point of connection and, in particular, when the French became alive.

The 19th Corps would have to attack the 24th, according to the order of Anderson received the night before. Koeltz immediately convened the divisional commanders and Gen Mathenet, in charge of the main effort, represented the need for a powerful artillery preparation for the

The retreat of the front south-west of Tunis from April 13 to May 8

Schizzo n. 84

ARRETRAMENTI DEL FRONTE A SUD-OVEST DI TUNISI
dal 13 aprile all'8 maggio



Schizzo n. 85

[illegible]

conquest of Djebel Mansour and asked and obtained permission to start the action at noon. Except that on the morning of the 24th the target turned out covered by a thick blanket of fog that showed no signs of thinning. In such conditions of visibility to less than a hundred meters it became impossible to direct the fire and even keep the direction. Reluctantly Koeltz postponed the operation to the next day. He received a disappointment: the 25th, just arrived at the Tactical Command of Mathenet heard that according to some evidence and the statements of two deserters from the DAK - providing the French attack, he thought -He had abandoned the salient. The disappointment, it should be noted, it resulted from failure to comply with his guidelines of the 18th, with whom he had prescribed to throw themselves on the enemy if it was withdrawn before the offensive: *"This pursuit was to be conducted vigorously and initiative to prevent the enemy an orderly withdrawal"* ⁽⁴⁶⁾. Immediately he ordered to get going, but only on the evening of the 27th the first elements reached the Saouaf-Pont du Fahs road.

On the morning of the 28th battalions in the second echelon of 2nd and the 3rd Algerian *Tirailleurs* tested the extreme left of the Stempel sector and obtained some results ⁽⁴⁷⁾. Moreover, the counterattack launched by a half company of the 25th battalion, reinforced by a few self-propelled of the Italian I A/T battalion and accompanied by the fire of 29th artillery corps grouping, restored the situation without loss.

Watched arrested almost in the bud the attempts of the next day and given the violent reaction of the Italian and German artillery, Koeltz became convinced that now had to do with a defense consolidated and that it was necessary mount a systematic attack to break through. Oriented to such an operation, forces drove in three areas: on the left the reconstituted division of Oran, in the center of Morocco and the right of Algiers. Except that the information gradually gathered and resistance encountered led him, on the 30th, to believe that he had reached the limit of the offensive capability of the 19th Corps. Because on the one hand the 9th Corps and the other hand the British 8th Army of Montgomery had already given up any ambition. Estimating useless and doomed isolated effort, wrote to Anderson, who said that "the attack of the 19th Corps at Djebel Zagouan it will not be launched until ordered by the army"⁽⁴⁸⁾.

The British 5th Corps was preparing for the meeting of April 22, when he suddenly found himself on the Germans. Von Arnim, was convinced or not, intended to follow the address of counterattacks estimates proposed by the OKW and Kesselring. Informed of the imminence of the offensive Anderson, he told von Vaerst to take the initiative. The most delicate was at Medjez el Bab. There could be no doubt about the extent of the Allied threat permitted by the direction, so it was necessary to steal the British possession of all heights between Medjez el Bab and

Gubellat. Thus the system of the offensive would be upset and the Allied pressure would suddenly lightened over most of the front. Of course he knew perfectly well that he would not be able to go beyond the limits of a large share of trouble, but the effects were perhaps higher than thought. Unfortunately forces used were limited to the 754th *Grenadier* reinforced by (*Kampfgruppe* Audorff), the *Hermann Goering* Parachute Regiment reinforced by the 7th *Panzerregiment* (*Kampfgruppe* Schirmer) and a battalion of the *Hermann Goering* Grenadier Regiment (*Kampfgruppe* Funck). The positions abandoned by these units were temporarily occupied by the 10th Motorcyclists Battalion and a few companies of infantry.

The operation, conducted by Gen. Schmid, commander of the *Hermann Goering*, engraved on the inside of the wings and the 4th Division and the English 1st, exploiting the element of surprise, it was unsuccessful ⁽⁴⁹⁾. The main role was played by *Kampfgruppe* Schirmer, which collected all the tanks available (eighty), including the latest Tiger, and was duly supported by *Kampfgruppe* Audorff. The Funck group was limited to cover the southern flank of the raid. After a few hours of wonder and confusion, the British resistance became more organized and the story changed face. The intervention by units of tanks and the proper use of artillery were able to block the attack and then to throw him back. The Germans lost 25 tanks and about 300 men. According to interceptions of the Italian 1st Army, the whole of the German forces flowed into complete disorder. The fact that the new wear of scarce resources armor weakened further the possibility of Axis reaction: even before the Allied offensive, von Arnim had lost a third of its few tanks.

On April 23, the four Allied Corps began in short succession of time the operation *Vulcan*. "From this moment - said Messe sadly in his report - has start the final crisis of the Tunisian campaign. Counterattacks avid defense fail for ten days to contain the attack, but the fate of the Axis armies in Tunisia, which were no longer fed by forces and means, is permanently marked. "

As we know, the part of the protagonists was entrusted to the British 5th and 9th Corps. Allfrey was to achieve the alignment Tebourba-Massicault. He started with the 78th and the 1st Inf. Div. at the turn of the Medjerda river and the 4th Inf. Div. towards Ksar Tyr. The first targets were well-known survey points to the English: Longstop Hill and Peter's Corner, in the area of the German 334th Div.. Two days of fierce fighting, respectively, against the 75th *Jaegergebirge* and 754th *Grenadier*, gave success to Allfrey.

9th Corps began the 22nd with the commitment of the 46th Inf. Div. against the reliefs to the west of Sebkret el Kourzia defended by two battalions of *grenadiers* of the- *Hermann Goering*. Even here in a couple of days things

turned to the better for the English, so that in the evening of the 23rd Gen. Crocker gave the 6th Arm. Div. the task to break through north of Pont du Fahs and to focus on Tunis. While, however, the division was contained by units of the 10th *Panzer*, von Vaerst warned the Army Group of the looming threat not only the right, but even on the rear of DAK. Von Arnim did not hesitate to order a general retreat to von Vaerst, wherever possible or necessary, of ten to fifteen kilometers to slightly narrow in front, and Cramer abandonment of Djebel Mansour, Chirich and Fkirine in favor of a shorter line comprising the left wing of *Hermann Goering*.

The losses were sensitive on both sides, but it is von Arnim von Vaerst not had doubts on the intention of the British insist the main effort in southern Medjerda. Once sure of having blocked the 9th Corps in the sector of el Sebkret Kourzia, von Vaerst readied a new Armored group commanded by Col. Irkens. The formation appeared respectable (5th, 7th and 8th *Panzerregiment*, 501st Heavy Armored Bn, 47th *Panzergrenadier*, Piscicelli Arm. Group., a group of Italian and a German artillery and two anti-aircraft groups of the 20th Flak Div.), however, in practice it was reduced to less than 70 tanks and a tired battalion. Nevertheless, the *Panzerbrigade* Irkens managed to impose itself on the troops of Allfrey, regaining some positions and stopping the penetration in a - series of heavy clashes between the 25th and 30 April ⁽⁵⁰⁾.

The far north Gen. Bradley had gathered most of his forces. Instead of two divisions and a half, as originally planned, he would have disposed of four divisions, one armored, and a logistics tool perfectly efficient, so bursting with optimism. Although his initial task was reduced to ensure the left flank of the 1st British Army, he kept in mind a recent letter to Eisenhower:

"The next phase of operations is of particular significance for American forces participating ... It is useless to close our eyes to the fact that we have faced difficulties and overcome them ... We have to prove to the world that the four American divisions now in front of you behave in a way that at least gives full credit to our material and the quality of our command ... "(51).

First of all it was necessary to skirt the 5th Corps proceeding along the Bab el Medjez Tunis and facilitate the advance. As a result, the attention of Bradley focused on positions that allowed the outlet in the plain of Mateur (Jefna relief) and in the lower valley of Medjerda (up to Chouigui). The first objective was assigned to the 9th Inf. Div. reinforced by the Free Corps of Africa and by the 4th and 6th Moroccan *Tabor*; the second objective to the 1st Inf. Div. reinforced by I/168th Inf. and by the 6th Arm. Inf..

The 2nd Corps attacked in the early hours of the 23rd preceded by a formidable artillery preparation made possible by 228 field pieces,

72 medium and 24 of heavy caliber and a huge amount of ammunition. To the north the 9th Inf. Div. of Gen. Eddy moved with all his infantry in line - the Free Corps of Africa, 60th, 39th and 47th Infantry - on a front of thirty kilometers. It was not a walk, but had the support of four groups 105 howitzers, two groups 155 howitzers cannons and a 155 battery. The hills which the bulk of the division von Manteuffel had clung to were kept by the 962nd Inf. blocking the Sedjenane Valley and 160th Panzergrenadiere astride the direction of Jefna.

A comparison did not arise. The 962nd Inf. consisted of the I/10th of Bersaglieri (ie a training battalion put together with the remains of the 10th Bersaglieri), II/962nd Inf., XI paratroopers Engineer battalion and a Arab-German battalion formation with a battery of 105, a few pieces of 75 and a half-dozen 88 guns. The 160th *Panzergrenadier* had battalions T1, T4 and A30 with some 75 pieces, a battery 105, a 150 and a 170.

The resistance of the defenders, however, was that the first day of the offensive proved a big disappointment for the Americans: the pillars of the position of resistance were very solid. It will take another three days of fierce fighting for swelled and to proceed in depth.

The 1st Inf. Div. had a larger role and a narrower field. Acting astride the boundary between the sector of the von Manteuffel division and the 334th *Jaegergebirge*, so it had to deal with the Parachute Regiment in Sidi Barenthin Nsy and 755th north of Medjerda. Here too, a comparison was not possible. Three battalions of paratroopers infantry and as many Germans opposed the 16th, 18th, 26th Inf., the I/168th Inf. and 6th Arm. Inf., supported by three groups 105 howitzers and one from 155 divisional, plus six groups of 105, three 155 howitzers and two 155 cannons of the corps ⁽⁵²⁾.

Gen. Allen was faced with a choice: to push up, namely in the area of Sidi Nsy, well served by a roadway but easily controlled by an organized defense in depth on several locations hilly respectable; or accept the invitation of the valley of Tine that opened widely and that appeared to Mateur easy practicability for armored vehicles. The rapid assessment of the soundness of the shares and the dominant side of the spread of minefields and mines scattered in the furrow so seductive led to call the valley of Tine "The Mousetrap" and to turn our gaze to the north.

On April 26, it became clear that, despite some initial progress, there is little hope of this way if it hill 609 had not fallen north-east of Sidi Nsy. Bradley then modified the deployment. He took advantage of the arrival of the 34th Inf. Div. to assign the sector of Sidi Nsy, then he limited the liability of the 1st Inf. Div. the central section and gave the 1st Arm. Div. the valley of Tine. Meanwhile the days passed in painful and futile clashes and Anderson showed signs of impatience,

so much to suggest to give up the conquest of the offending portion and go around it. Bradley persuaded him of the impossibility of moving forward along any direction unless he removed that obstacle. And on April 30 hill 609 finally fell.

The operation *Vulcan* not only was losing momentum, but, far worse, seemed transformed into a series of local battles and badly coordinated. The 1st Army had virtually stopped: the American 2nd Corps did not give much confidence to be able to break through and quickly reach the plain of Mateur; the British 5th Corps had even lost Djebel Bou Aoukaz following the desperate counterattack of *Panzerbrigade* Irckens (remained immobilized by lack of fuel); the British 9th and French 19th were just in contact with the new positions which had pushed back the German and Italians. As for the 8th Army, it could not even prevent the bleeding of the army of Messe in favor of 5th *Panzerarmee*.

Of course, from the other side it was known that the wear and tear of von Vaerst was tremendous. Any counterattack affected the growing scarcity of tanks and fuel; every setback cost losses in men, weapons and means, "and yet - then watched an English scholar - in the last week of April did not appear any clear sign that the soldiers of the Axis were fighting with less force and less skill than demonstrated in the past; they counterattacked stubbornly any incursion and did not surrender never lightly. The price that the Allies were paying was high; advanced a kilometer a day was already a great success" ⁽⁵³⁾.

Even before the fighting trailed off on the front of the 5th *Panzerarmee*, an officer sent by the Comando Supremo into Tunisia - Lt. Col. Dogliani - returned to Rome and immediately presented a report that is worth recounting in full.

"During that period (19-25 April) took place on the front of the 1st Army the first phase of the battle for the breaking of the line Enfidaville and has started on the front of the 5th Army, to attack the breakthrough of our positions along the line of Medjez el Bab and Pont du Fahs. In respect of the progress of the battle is on the front of the 1st Army as the front of the 5th Army is convenient wait for their relationships and especially following the events before drawing conclusions.

"For the moment, after the talks with the his Exc. Messe and other officers, is only possible states:

- Overall the battle was in the tactical field, a defeat for the enemy; in the big picture instead it will be a boon for the enemy if, taking the battle, will take advantage of the fact of having had to spend all our reserves and use precious materials and ammunition;

- The situation at the end of the battle, it is fair for us, but it can quickly become critical and, to be clear, unsustainable if we are forced to leave undefended the front of the army too few reserves to run on other, more threatened areas ;
- You can hold the Tunisian bridgehead only if it can ensure the arrival of supplies: fuel and ammunition at first, troops at a later time;
- The order of resistance to the bitter end as the troops in Tunisia is a word devoid of meaning if this order is not followed by the insured arrival of supplies;
- To make supplies arrive in Tunisia must have the possibility to transit through the Strait of Sicily. Ensure this possibility with any sacrifice is not the task of the troops who fought there, but of others.

"In conclusion: if, and what would the miracle, the war that still continues in Tunisia were to end in our favor and give us at least a stopping time, it would be necessary to strengthen the Italian forces in Tunisia as soon as at least 500 fighter aircraft, 2-4 divisions of high moral, ensure supplies and prepare for the establishment of a supply of intangible 1,000 tons of fuel and 5 *unfoc* for all weapons. Without these resolutions also a victory in the struggle that is being fought now would be in vain.

"I will mention now the feelings had to be seeing by talking to Command and troops.

"Commanders. The figure of his Exc. Messe dominates as completely the opposite of his army. It is the facilitator of the resistance; in this, very well supported by its dependents and by his General Staff. His control is established at the same limit the deployment of artillery and is therefore not subjected to the offense only air, that does not let up day or night, but at the same enemy artillery fire. Officers and troops in line, while not hiding the difficulties of their situation, have high morale and fighting tenaciously well because they understand that in Tunisia defends Italy. This spirit decreases as you move away from the line of fire to the rear, where lurk the timid and the discontented, the defeatists in black and those in red, the latter most dangerous because demean the tasks - they see everything with simple and all well - of those who fight and die hard.

"Marshal Kesselring. In various contacts with officers and hearsay, I had the impression that he does not enjoy the complete confidence of everyone, including German. The remark is made in general to see the situation a little bit too optimistic and that, by representing it then to that effect to the Duce and the Italian Chief of Staff General, cause the enactment of provisions that sometimes do not correspond to reality.

"Gen. von Arnim. Many complaints, especially by the Italian Commander.

He made specific accusations of lacking energy and undergo a little too much to the strong personality of his Chief of Staff, General Gause.

"Troops. His Exc. Messe was very satisfied with the behavior of his troops, both infantry artillery, which have been in combat equal if not superior to the German troops. Our soldiers, however, are very tired and worn out to fight because they are always the same elements, which have the most varied backgrounds and so the units are very little homogeneous. The first phase of the battle ended with a defeat for the enemy because the results can not compensate for heavy losses. Even for us losses have been severe, especially in officers. If will be sent to other units, besides those already prepared, it is felt that these need to be high morale and not complements. Paratroopers, Assault, Alpine would be very welcome.

"Artillery. The intervention of artillery fire, but especially that it is our enemy, has taken a rhythm that reaches, if not surpasses, the terrible fires pounding of last World War. 19-20-21 in April not a moment's respite, but the fire continued with the same intensity and violence. Conclusion: a huge consumption of ammunition.

"Aviation. The enemy aviation supremacy is unquestioned. I personally witnessed massive bombing of airfields made in broad daylight by a formation of heavy aircraft amounting to 18-30, heavily escorted, bombing of the "carpet" type with the simultaneous release of the full load of bombs; one of the first combat aircraft in the sky between two German armed aircraft and an attacking formation (in the back I then got in the car the driver of one of the Germans aircraft who had jumped with a parachute); enemies fighter attacks against trucks, passenger cars (including mine, attacked seven times on Saturday afternoon in the Pont du Fahs) and also to a small German military wagon pulled by two horses that were killed. On day 22, at the Battle of Enfidaville, our aviation in Tunisia we had 20 combat efficient aircraft, and the losses were due in particular to the destruction done on the fields.

"Attacks on aerial convoys. And one of the problems that require the fastest solution, under threat of complete destruction of all our aviation. I talked with officers who had been with the convoy killed on 19 April, which I pointed out that it had been attacked by a formation of about 50 fighters just off Cape Bon, and virtually every transport aircraft were culled or they were destroyed attempting a landing off the field, on unsuitable soil of the Peninsula.

"Supplies. They are the large, constant concern of all. In order to give a simple guidance on the deficiency of fuel, I had on the 20th, I arrived in Tunisia, use the same

car as the Intendant to go to the Command of the Army Group, because the others were empty of fuel, the distribution of which was limited to the ambulances. The next day of the 22nd some radio had ceased to function due to lack of petrol. The arrival of 280 tons on the 24th gave new hope. A little less worse is the situation of ammunition, but not such as to give a sense of tranquility.

"Relations with the Germans. In the tactical field, the most comprehensive cooperation; serious complaints out of the battlefield by the continued arrogance of the Germans, who did not hesitate to resort even to force to take our trucks of which they need. This engenders a sense of bitterness and anger in the elements in the rear who are in contact with the ally.

"They are currently setting up, by the Germans, the fortified towns of Bizerte and Tunis, in the boundary of which will be the opposite, in case of the failure of the front, the last stand. The work and the defense also participate Italian elements who are based in the scope of the strongholds"⁽⁵⁴⁾.

4. THE LAST BATTLE.

Alexander wanted to respect the date of 15 May to close the game and thought to succeed by strengthening the 1st Army for the decisive attack. They had come to the point where things did not seem that the Axis could take much more. The decryption of *Enigma* messages brought to light the desperate straits in which von Vaerst and Messe struggled. April 24 had been assessed an availability of 60,000 Italian-German fighters, 100 tanks and 115 planes efficient, with almost no hope of reinforcements, compared with more than 300,000 men, 1,400 tanks and 3,240 aircraft allies and will, in the opinion of the head information office of the 18th Army Group, "*with the limited resources currently available it is unlikely that the opponent is able to offer prolonged resistance to our continued and increasing pressure*"⁽⁵⁵⁾. Although in the days following the German counterattacks continued unabated and without referring to diminish in intensity, the interception of 28 and 29 made it known that the Army Group Africa Commander was expected "*the complete collapse of logistics*", and that the ammunition and fuel just landed were consumed and that the fuel situation was even catastrophic.

As above Alexander decided to launch the final blow by Anderson along the Bab el-Medjez Massicault- Tunis with a violence that prevents any resistance or even simple retarding actions. It was not enough, in fact, break through. He wanted to avoid an African Dunkirk - widespread fear among the Allied Command, under which it was considered possible evacuation of up to 70,000

men by the Axis-which would have resulted in a considerable strengthening of Sicily. Frankly, at that point, it is difficult to understand such a situation seen the almost total domination of the allied air and sea routes and the equally almost total lack of means of transport between Italy and Germany.

In charge of the effort it was the main British 9th Corp⁽⁵⁶⁾, which would act with two infantry divisions in the first line in a sector strike of 2,500 meters, heeled by two armored divisions in the second row, supported by all the artillery available on-site (400 guns) and facilitated by a formidable aerial bombardment. No stopping or slowing: creating pockets of resistance had to be overcome without concern for the safety of the flanks. The 5th Corp was responsible for keeping open the stretch of breakthrough.

Operation *Strike*, this convenient name, would begin on May 6, but had to be preceded by secondary actions, even for demonstration purposes: 2 May (then 4), the French had to move against the Djebel Zaghouan while the New Zealanders, to their right, they would have acted against Saouaf, to distract the defenses of the DAK; The 5th the 5th Corps was to attack Djebel Bou Aoukaz to facilitate the arrival of the operation and the Americans resume the advance in the direction of Bizerte (sketch n. 86).

For their part the Italian-German was, in practice, waiting for the end. May 2 von Arnim signaled:

"Increased tension of the situation supplies in all sectors. Fuel, calculated existences at units and stores, have been reduced to half a day; supplies ammunition, food and water for the troops can be made only with great difficulty. Radio broadcasts will cease probably the 4th. The aviation weapon and Italian troops will no longer give you limited help. All current ammunition for artillery and anti-tank cannons at the depots are exhausted"⁽⁵⁷⁾.

The conquest of hill 609 and its neighbors, although obtained at a high price, he restarted the Americans. The two wings of the 2nd Corps soon threatened Mateur with an advanced systematic and von Vaerst was forced to make a leap back, anchoring the Manteuffel Division, now commanded by Gen. Bulowius, at Garaet Ighknul and the 334th, now under the command of Gen. Krause⁽⁵⁸⁾, on the heights west of Chouigui. So towards 11:00 of May 3 the 81st reconnaissance battalion of *Combat Command B* (Gen. Robinett) of the 1st Arm. Div. entered the abandoned Mateur. The reshuffle of the German front at that date included the area north of Garaet Ichknul held by the Commander of the square of Bizerte (Gen. Bassenge); the south, up to Chouigui excluded from the Bulowius division; Medjerda the sector was still manned by very worn 334th Inf. Div.; by Tebourba Massicault was inserted the 15th *Panzer*, which in practice was reduced to 115th *Panzergranadier* reinforced; followed, finally, the *Hermann*

Schizzo n. 86

This is a detailed military map of Tunisia, showing the positions of German and Italian forces during the North African campaign. The map includes major cities like Biserta, Tunis, and Medjez el Bab, and military units such as the 3rd Luftwaffe, 15th Panzer, and 10th Panzer. It also shows the Mediterranean coast, the sea, and various roads and railways. A scale bar at the bottom indicates distances in kilometers.

Geographical Features:

- Cities:** Biserta, Tunis, Medjez el Bab, Bou Grada, Zaghwan, Grombalia.
- Rivers:** D. f. Bulowius, D. f. Tébessa.
- Coastline:** The Mediterranean Sea is shown to the east and south.
- Roads and Railways:** A network of lines connects major locations, with some marked with 'X' or 'XX'.

Military Units and Positions:

- German Forces:**
 - 3rd Luftwaffe (3^{er} D.f.):** Positioned near Biserta and Tunis.
 - 15th Panzer:** Positioned near Tunis and the D. f. Tébessa.
 - 10th Panzer:** Positioned near Zaghwan and the D. f. Tébessa.
 - H. Goering:** Positioned near the D. f. Tébessa.
 - DAK (Deutsches Afrikanische Korps):** Positioned near Zaghwan.
 - 5th Motorized Division (5^e Division Motorisée):** Positioned near Zaghwan.
 - Other German Units:** Various units are marked with 'X' or 'XX' symbols, including units near Medjez el Bab, Bou Grada, and Zaghwan.
- Italian Forces:**
 - 1st Army (1^{re} Armata):** Positioned near Biserta.
 - Other Italian Units:** Various units are marked with 'X' or 'XX' symbols, including units near Medjez el Bab, Bou Grada, and Zaghwan.

Scale: A scale bar at the bottom indicates distances in kilometers (0, 10, 20, 30 Km).

Goering and 10th *Panzer*. Unchanged fronts of the DAK and the Italian 1st Army. Because now everything could happen, von Arnim had indicated that in the case of a Allied penetration in depth, the front north of it would be left in the hands of von Vaerst, while the south would be controlled by Messe.

The first to begin the preliminaries was Koeltz. To his left was the British 1st Arm. Div. with the task of merely local activities, while keeping in position to intervene to cover the flank of the French. At 04:30 on May 4 he took off the attack of the 19th Corps body the east sub sector of the *Superga* and the sector of the 21st *Panzer*. If the elimination of some advanced security structures introduced a relatively simple, well otherwise it happened to the strongholds. The violent reaction of the artillery stopped the advance and *Valentine* given to reinforced the divisions Mathenet and Conne were stranded in the middle of the minefields.

The next day took over a pause, broken only by enemy fire on the positions of the DAK. Koeltz was embarrassed: he would need planes for the observation of the fire and not possess. He asked the Army, in vain. "*Maybe - he said with bitter irony - to the Command of the 1st Army was believed that our efforts do not become invested with no further interest in the continuation of the British operations*" ⁽⁵⁹⁾. However, the fighting drew a conclusion of the two days absolutely wrong. "*The enemy had been shaken –he wrote later - some units had withdraw precipitously and the fear of a breakthrough had been transmitted to the rearward Commands*" ⁽⁶⁰⁾. Things were, instead, in a completely different way due to the penetration made by the British 9th Corp.

On May 5, Eisenhower cabled to Washington:

"Tomorrow morning we will start the great offensive which we hope and believe will take us to Tunis within one or two days. I think we can overcome very soon the point of Bizerte, but the conquest of the peninsula of Cape Bon might be difficult" ⁽⁶¹⁾.

At dusk the British 1st Inf. Div. acted on his part of the program. He had to win the Djebel Bou Aoukaz, the complex that controlled the inside of the grooves of Tebourba and Massicault. He dedicated the 3rd Brigade with the support of more than 600 guns. The Djebel was taken. It was, as we know, a preliminary, although very important.

At 03:00 in the morning the artillery of the 5th Corps was manifested throughout his power. In the first twenty-four hours fired about 360 rounds per piece: more than at El Alamein. Not to mention air support concentrated among Massicault and St. Cyprien. 67 Americans *Boston* bombers began, followed by those of the *Royal Air Force*, then came the daytime bombers of the *Western Desert Air Force*. In the afternoon they all took turns in an intoxicating carousel. Never in Africa had reached the number of sorties (1958) carried out from sunset of the

5th to sunset on May 6th(62). "*By dint of bombs* - he wrote the Gen. Arnold in his final report - *we opened a corridor between Medjez el Bab and Tunis.*"

In the first row they were acting the 4th Indian and the 4th English. At noon the targets were conquered. It was now up to the 6th and the 7th Armored. One of the warnings of Alexander was just about their intervention: at all costs needed to avoid excessive waste of time in bypassing the infantry. They reached the goal in the late morning, then continued, although a bit slow, at least according to the Gen. Toker, commander of the 4th Indian: "*It appears from my notes* - he wrote later - *both the 7th Armored Division, and the 6th on his right, managed with great efforts only to get to Massicault, less than five kilometers away of Main objectives of the infantry.*" He not had a point to deplore a lack of boldness. The 15th Panzer was knocked out from the action destroyed.

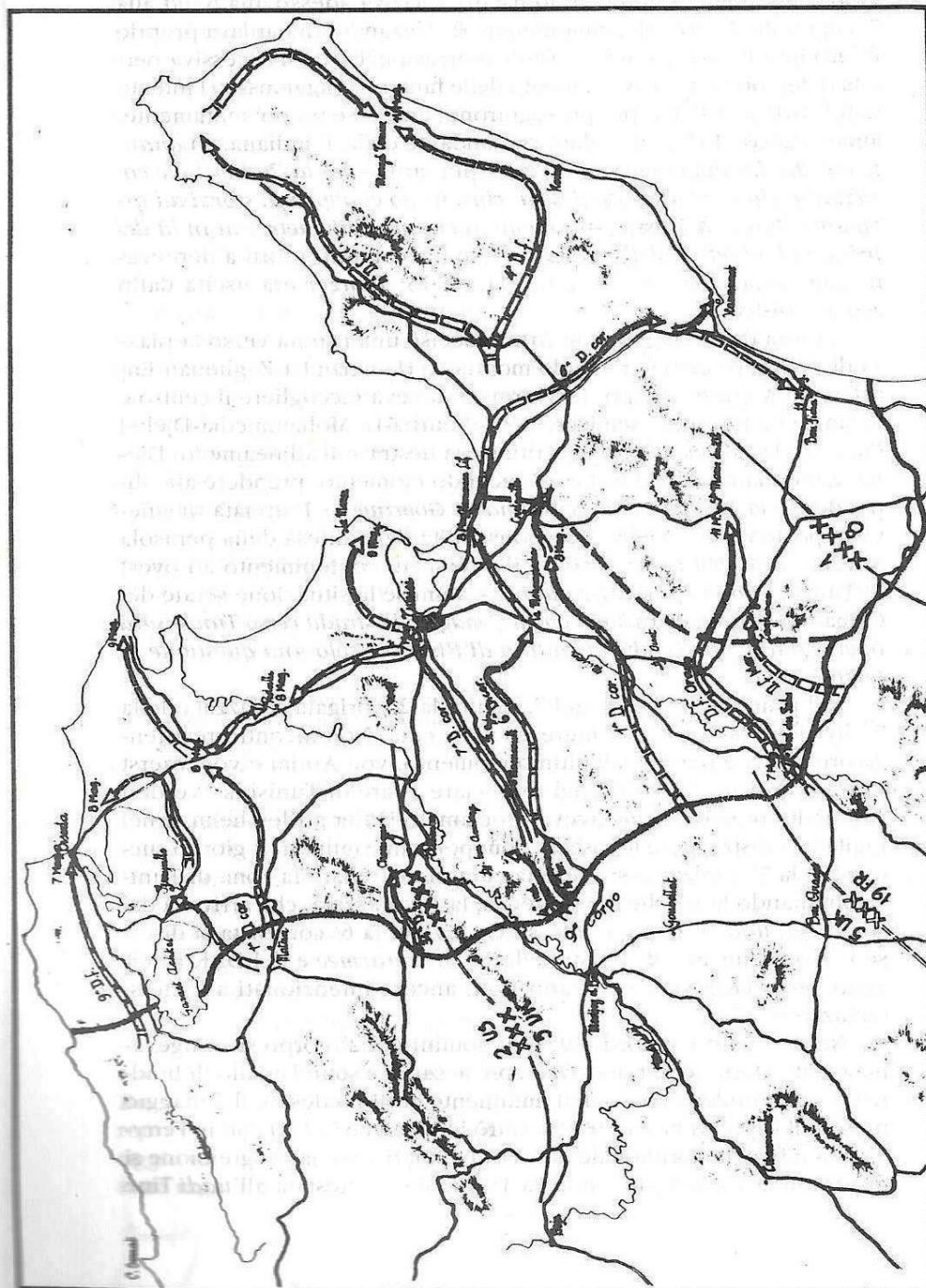
On the evening of May 6 von Arnim decided a retreat towards the fort of Bizerte and for the mountainous triangle Hamman-Lif Zaghouan-Enfidaville. To this end, the 5th Army had to raise the center and the left on the back of the semicircle Tebourba-La Mohammedia-Djebel Oust; the Afrika Korps to withdraw the right alignment Djebel Zaghouan Djebel Oust-and, later, take the employ of the 10th Panzer and the *Hermann Goering*; the 1st Army remained in place and assumed the responsibility of the defense of the peninsula of Cape Bon. But there was little to delude the containment west of Tunis. "*There can be no doubt - the evening situation the Commander of the Army Group admitted - 7 May that the road to Tunis will be open by the enemy and that the fall of Bizerte is only a matter of time*" (63).

In the early afternoon of the 7th, in fact, the 26th Armored Brigade of the 7th Division made his entrance into the city. He not encountered organized resistance because, at the last moment, von Arnim and von Vaerst had agreed to give up in Tunis the "*Verdun of the Mediterranean*", as proclaimed Hitler in Klessheim, and simply destroy the port and military installations. The next day, the 7th Armored took care to rake the area of Tunis eliminating pockets of resistance; the armor, which came out of the rut of the Miliane *wadis*, pointed out Creteville; 6th Armored headed Hammam-Lif. The remains of the 5th Panzerarmee and DAK flowed toward the peninsula of Cape Bon, still willing to fight (sketch n. 87).

Meanwhile, to the north, the 95,000 men of the 2nd Corps is pushed forward. After local clashes increasingly avid and under the worry of Bradley, who was aware of the impending German collapse, on 7 May took over. The 9th Inf. Div entered Bizerte and the 1st Arm. Div. in Ferryville. On the southern side of the American sector, the progression showed himself to be much more slow. The 1st Inf. Div. had been aimed at the Tine *wadi*

The breakthrough of the Western Front (May 6 to 11)

LO SFONDAMENTO DEL FRONTE OCCIDENTALE (6-11 maggio)



and the 34th had been instructed to continue, except that the resistance from the troops of the German 334th Inf. Div. became obvious higher than expected and did not allow the hoped for fast success. Ultimately, the evening of the 7th division had to mark time.

The announcement of the fall of Tunis and Bizerte was given by the Comando Supremo and to the OKW on May 8. The latter declared that Tunisia was going to be abandoned and that "*31,000 Germans and 30,000 Italians who remained*" would be evacuated by sea. Alexander immediately assured Eisenhower of being willing to prevent such cases, in which, moreover, would have required at least the establishment of a strong foothold in the peninsula. For his part, Adm. Cunningham had ordered his ships: "*Sink, burned, destroy, nothing should pass*" ⁽⁶⁴⁾. Moreover, where Tunis and Bizerte had appeared doomed, all Axis vessels able to take the sea had moved to Sicily.

Between 8 and 9 May, the northern front dissolved. At 09:30 of the 9th von Vaerst transmitted the last message to von Arnim:

"Our tanks and our artillery were destroyed. We're out of ammunition and fuel. We will fight to the end".

Half an hour later sent envoys for an armistice to the Commander of the 1st Arm. Div. of Gen. Harmon. These Bradley warned, and added: "There will be trouble with these people. They are roughed up to be throw away. They even asked for an armistice to find their way, given that their communications are interrupted. I stopped my cars and given the order to cease fire." Faced with the sharp reply of unconditional surrender, von Vaerst midday accepted the capitulation. With that disappeared the Commands of the 5th *Panzerarmee*, the Bulowius division, the 334th and the 15th *Panzer* Division.

To the south in front of the British armor and the French 19th Corps was creating a vacuum. He already mentioned the decision of von Arnim to find some way to stem the Allied breakthrough at Massicault. In connection therewith the Gen. Cramer had ordered the rotation of the front of the north-east of Pont du Fahs, pivoting on Djebel Zaghouan. The management of the new line was ensured by units of the *Hermann Goering*, the 10th *Panzer* and the 21st *Panzer*. The *Superga* had to go temporarily in reserve, at about ten kilometers north of Zaghouan, except for the artillery was left at the disposal of the 21st *Panzer*. The unnoticed abandonment of positions took place in the night on the 8th without hindrance from the French side, thanks, probably, to the rainy weather.

The first to react to signs of withdrawal was the English 1st Arm. Div., which on the 7th marched eastward trying to regain contact. Around noon Gen. Boissau knew of this advance and, in the spirit of the directives received ("*There are*

times when one must know how to dare, to risk"), immediately ordered his regiments to attack. At about 20:00 entered Pont du Fahs.

Admittedly, hearing about the British success, Koeltz had prescribed to the three divisions of continually checking the opponent and moving forward at the slightest sign of retreat, but the initiative of the Division of Grano had not been completed by the necessary communication to the corps Command. That he was made aware in mid-afternoon and just because Boissau would ask for a reinforcement of the next two tanks squadrons for the exploitation of success. For further mix-up Koeltz knew the situation develops in the late evening. On the morning of the 8th the entire 19th Corps threw himself on the DAK, but with different results. The Couteulx armored grouping, called in emergency to bypass leading troops was stuck in Moghrane; the division of Boissau proceeded northward little difficulty overcoming the Mathenet managed to advance with his left but stood with his right hand to Djebel Zaghuan; Conne remained more or less where it was. Koeltz then realized that the DAK had hired a new north-south alignment, pivoting on Djebel Zaghuan, and thought to make itself a rotation towards Ste Marie du Zit and Bou Fichta to grasp behind the 1st Army of Messe. Early in the afternoon of the 9th Gen. Nichols, Chief of the G.S. of Anderson, came to see him: the concept of maneuver was accepted. At 20:20 followed the official confirmation:

"Apply pressure by all means possible and speed along the axis passing from Zaghuan, so cut off Axis troops who are still in the south of the peninsula of Cape Bon" ⁽⁶⁵⁾.

Messe had followed the evolving situation oriented to retreat north of Enfidaville, covering his flanks, even the best. A further setback, which surely would have been made under the pressure of a victorious enemy, was not of any strategic significance and, on the other hand, was likely to result in the disbanding of the unit, until then very well in hand.

The initial directive von Arnim, which ordered the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* to organize a new line of defense from the Djebel Zaghuan to Djebel Gust, was quickly adapted to the sudden rupture of the front, especially the need to reach Hamman Lif with his right. But while the DAK proceeded orderly rotation prescribed in the night on the 7th and 8th, and the 10th *Panzer* was able to move back holding on to its height, the *Hermann Goering* swooped in crisis. It was devoid of the ability to use its vehicles and armored vehicles for lack of fuel, retreated on foot without being able to make an preventive escape from the enemy and undergoing very considerable losses. So, not only could not extend the line of the DAK and occupy the threshold Hamman Lif, but even part was broken ⁽⁶⁶⁾. Therefore the northern sector of the DAK was employed the 19th *Flak* Division (Gen. Franz), obviously with his ad-hoc units,

including a *Luftwaffe* battalion sent immediately by the 1st Army.

On May 8, Messe held a meeting with his major subordinates. There were Orlando and Berardi, commanders of artillery (Gen. Belletti) and Engineers (Gen. Rea), as well as the commander of the *Superga*, which had unsuccessfully asked to be accepted among the ranks of the Italian ⁽⁶⁷⁾. He illustrated without much circumlocution the state of affairs and stared at the line of conduct to follow. Regardless of what could happen elsewhere, the army would remain in place until the end of her ability, creating somewhat barriers on the rear, at the new directions of attack it was clear the enemy would open. For this purpose it was necessary to study the creation, in due course, of a "reduced" army in the mountainous area with the 164th Light, the *Trieste* and the *Giovani Fascisti* in current positions, facing south; the 90th Light withdrawing to form part of the gorge and the eastern flank; the *Pistoia* on the front of the pass and *Spezia* on the western flank.

The calculation of the fighting force, however, was discouraging. The XX Corps possessed 13,000 Italian and about 5,000 (?) Germans; the XXI Corp of 14,000 Italian and about 5,000 (?) Germans; artillery and engineers had 12,000 men. Total: 50,000 fighters in round figures ⁽⁶⁸⁾.

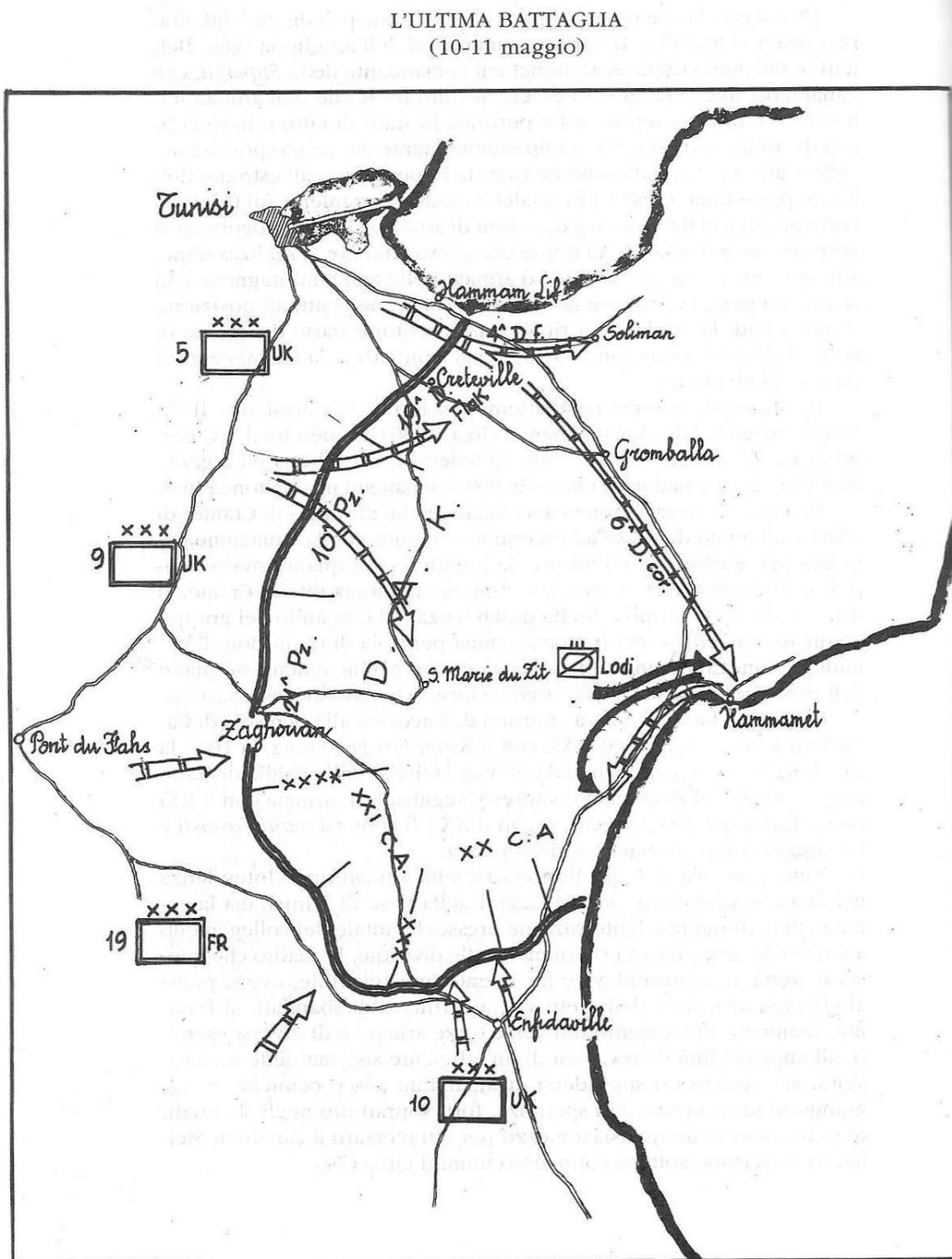
In terms of defense, we must also mention the refusal of Cramer to join the invitation of Messe out a joint examination of the general situation for the consequent measures to be taken. As obvious the opportunity to give a unitary last defense, Cramer entrenched behind their direct dependence on the Army Group command, who moved in the meantime to the peninsula of Cape Bon. And a certain undeniable absence of von Arnim at least in harmonization of efforts ⁽⁶⁹⁾. Or perhaps it was resignation.

The semicircle of the Axis to closure of access to the peninsula of Cape Bon therefore saw the DAK with *Kampfgruppe* Franz, the 10th and 21st *Panzer* (now commanded by Col. Von Helsen) from the threshold of Hamman Lif to Djebel Zaghouan including; He followed the 1st Army with the XXI Corp (*Spezia* and 164th Light) and XX (*Trieste*, *Giovani Fascisti* and 90th Light) to the sea (sketch n. 88).

The peninsula of Cape Bon was able to move the Italian Superintendency with most of the stores based in Tunis, but fuel shortages and the almost total interruption of the wire connections made the divisions supplies precarious. The picture that this narrow area showed you can imagine, when you think of the classic disorder of the rear, the influx of misfits, the intermingled elements of different armed forces and other armies, the inability to take advantage of an efficient system of transmissions, to the uninterrupted succession of enemy air raids. Add the understandable hopes, especially in strong stragglers, they could find any means to cross the Strait of Sicily. Only about eight hundred men succeeded ⁽⁷⁰⁾.

The last battle (May 10 to 11)

Schizzo n. 88



On 8 and 9 May the British 6th Arm. Div. attacked vehemently threshold of Hamman Lif. At first it found strong resistance, but in the late afternoon of the second day managed to blow open the door. The way to Hammamet was open and before the peninsula of Cape Bon would be cut off. In addition, the right of the DAK had collapsed and unfortunately it was only a matter of right wing. Cramer was holding the situation in the sector of Zaghouan so to speak. The defense had a expeditious character basted therein, except the Djebel Zaghouan, validly held by *Kampfgruppe* Pfeiffer. Even the *Superga*, as a reserve, little could be done in the condition in which he found himself. Indeed, the command of the DAK had suggested contracting the 91st and 92nd of an infantry battalion each, to be used in strengthening the German divisions. Gelich refused not only accede to the request would have meant the dissolution of the *Superga* but, objectively, had sufficient personnel to form the regiments with two battalions.

Cramer had had clear ideas about the present and future. On May 10 he spoke with Messe. Since there is no way to Guno to oppose effectively the spread of the Allied columns because everywhere hooked deeply, he proposed to hold at all costs against the 19th Corps and to resist as far as possible and the availability of ammunition against attacks from the north and East. No room for maneuver for lack of fuel, no chance to extend the front of DAK past Creteville, no possibility of reaction against strong penetration of armor or activate front of the gorge by mutual agreement with the 1st Army. Depletion of ammunition was expected during the day. Ultimately, the DAK remained only waiting for the end with the only concern of falling standing.

In order, therefore, to improve to some extent the defense against the French, Cramer oriented Gelich the imminent engagement in an area north of the town of Zaghouan, between the 21st *Panzer* of Col. von Helsen and the 10th of Gen. von Broich, with the consequent recovery of the 5th artillery. The measure was designed to raise men for the formation of a mobile reserve: the two infantry regiments had initially come into the line on Germanic orders and return the employ of *Superga* once withdrawn to the German mobile units (12:00 of the day).

But events rushed. Koeltz had turned to the northeast and invested all his energy the new enemy front. He had ordered the division of Boissau to occupy Djebel Oust to give security to the exposed flank to the division of Mathenet to take and pass Zaghouan and the division of Conne to undermine the pillar from the east of Djebel Zaghouan. As the 19th Corps strives unsparingly, the results did not meet the expectations due to the tenacious resistance still offered by remnants of divisions of the Axis clung to handholds of land of poor practicability. Only the left, things seemed easier. On the evening of the 10th, therefore, he resolved to move the Koeltz armored grouping as reinforcement to Le Couteulx

the division of Oran and made aware of the breakthrough achieved by the 6th Arm. Div., Boissau invited to drop any concern for Djebel Oust (from the north came the 4th Indian) and to mass against the Germans. At noon of the 11th front collapsed.

The French attack had developed during the morning raising troubling symptoms for the stability of the defensive positions, so that Cramer, given the situation, told Gelich to postpone to take command of a *Superga* sector and leave instead regiments employed German underway. It seemed the lesser evil.

Around noon the Col. Incisa, commander of the 5th Artillery, announced that he has executed the order of the commander of the artillery of the *Afrikakorps* to "*shoot all the ammunition and, with the last shot, to blow up the guns.*" At the same time the commanders of the 91st and the 92nd Infantry were warned to be isolated: many German units abandoned the line, others were giving up, no connection existed with the sector commands. Gelich then realized that this was the end and gestured for everyone to gather around the division command, more to avoid the general confusion to form a cornerstone.

At about 14:00 came a message of Cramer. It was terse, sad and deeply significant: "*The commanders of individual units, each to their own, act in the interests of human life.*" Gelich wanted to wait, but he knew that the solution was forced ⁽⁷⁹⁾.

For the French, as well as collecting the prisoners in influx, he arose now another target, Ste Marie du Zit, to establish the tactical connection with the 6th Arm. Div., already arrested in Hammamet, and to close the circle around the Italian Army. There was prompted by the La Couteulx group reinforced and his entourage moved the division of Boissau.

After 17:00 Gelich, now surrounded, sent to the envoy of Gen. Boissau and accepted the surrender the next morning. Further south the Lt. Col. *Pfeiffer*, commander of the south wing of the 21st *Panzer*, namely at Djebel Zaghuan, had also agreed to the similar conditions set by Gen. Mathenet.

Von Arnim had escaped in time the trap of the Cape Bon peninsula and his staff had moved near Ste Marie du Zit to share the fate of the troops. At 10:15 of the 12th sent word to Messe of the destruction of the broadcast center of the Army Group. Shortly after he surrendered to the 4th Indian Inf. Div..

Cramer also surrendered. His last message, at 12:40 of the 12th, he said:

"The ammunition is finished, the weapons and the means destroyed. According to the orders received, the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* fought until the conditions in which he could no longer fight. The *Deutsches Afrikakorps* will rise again. bye-bye Safari."

Alexander telegraphed to Churchill:

"The end is imminent. Von Arnim was captured and it is likely that the number of prisoners already exceed 150,000. Organized resistance has collapsed; no resistance other than some isolated nuclei. It seems that up to now we have captured over 1,000 artillery pieces, including 180 of 88 mm guns, 250 tanks and several thousand vehicles, many of which are still usable. The column of German vehicles, led personally by the prisoners, has blocked all day today and the road between Grombalia Medjez el Bab.

Esteem to send in a few hours another telegram to announce the formal conclusion of the battle" ⁽⁷²⁾.

After the surrender of the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* remained standing only the Italian 1st Army. Most likely - I think Koeltz - the Italians ignored the arrival of the French behind them, so it was better hurry to consolidate the encirclement. By noon of the 13th the movements they had to be completed: the division of Canne on the heights to the west of Saouaf, in front of the *Spezia*; division of Mathenet east of Zaghuan before the *Kampfgruppe* Pfeiffer; the division of Boissau just north of the line Italian, on a front of eight kilometers; The Couteulx grouping at Bou Ficha.

The most pressing concerns of Messe were not facing south. The operations of the 8th Army had hitherto limited to a local business. He knew in the line the 2nd New Zealand Inf. Div., the 56th Inf. Div., the 1st Free French Inf. Div., the 4th and the 8th Arm. Bd., all framed in the 10th Army Corps commanded by Freyberg. Only the army reserve, the 51st *Highlanders*. The danger came from the north. Forcing threshold of Hamman Lif left no room for illusions.

All mobile units in the rear shipped from Gen. Costa to cover the director Hamman-Lif Hammamet had disappeared from the scene on the day of the 10th, one after another, surpassed by the English 6th Arm. Div.. He remained the *Lodi* armored car grouping, Col. Lequio, brought to Hammamet: from 19:00 to 23:30 resisted, then had to fall back simply to put up a elastic defense.

It seemed to Messe the time to act on the first steps for the construction of a fort, namely the establishment of the gorge. The XXI Corps was to move the *Pistoia* (three battalions and an artillery group) to the north, which barred the road Zaghuan-Enfidaville, and take the *Spezia* ready to rotate with right up to join with *Pistoia*. The XX Corp was to move to the reverse side the new Maggio regimental grouping (I and II regiment *Duca d'Aosta*, II/35th Infantry and III/361st *Panzer grenadier*) and take the 90th Light ready to rotate with the left up to be closely connected with the Maggio regimental grouping. The *Lodi*, which in all likelihood would have been able to rely on their own resources, was still in his work of retarding, without being hooked (sketch n. 89).

Also on the morning of the 11th, the 90th Light received a proposal made by Gen. Freyberg⁽⁷³⁾, but von Sponeck, informed the commander of the army, not to answer.

The pressure was now heavy. The 164th Light had lost

Schizzo n. 89

A hand-drawn map of the Balkan region, specifically the area around Trieste and Udine, showing military positions and movements. The map includes labels for various locations: Trieste, Udine, Lodi, Meggio, Dignano, Spazio, Sarnaf, 104° leg., Bi. Gora, Enfidaville, Lodi, Meggio, Dignano, Spazio, Sarnaf, 104° leg., Bi. Gora, Enfidaville. It also shows military units: FR (French), UK (British), NZ (New Zealand), and FL (Flemish). A scale bar indicates distances from 0 to 15 km. A note "Dj. Mame 1985" is present.

and taken a position object of the aims of the 5th New Zealand Brigade, the *Trieste* had replied hardly an attack of the 1st Free French division, the *Lodi* grouping fought bravely near Bou Fichta. That day in Gen. Mattioli announced to the Comando Supremo:

Were overwhelmed all remaining deployment DAK today, we can surely expect that all enemy forces will spill immediately on the 1st Army, attacking from the north even if it can be opposed only thin veil worn & tired troops.

Area available for final army defense is completely bare, devoid of any preparations northward, characterized by isolated peaks interspersed with numerous thresholds that make it possible effort concentric enemy. Under such conditions, the latter has the task extremely easy, even for his contribution formidable air force, now, free other tasks, have already today intensified their activities against the army. Infinitely difficult and expensive task appears instead defense, which extension will import inevitably very great sacrifices in blood. "

The night on the 12th the *Spezia* swung to the northeast forming the western front of the fort. As for the German units nearby, also it occurred to them. psychological breakdown, or, if you will, the psychological disengagement from what concerned the fighting in Tunisia. Gen. Scattini, before moving the *Spezia*, informed Lt. Col. Hissmann, Germanic sector commander deployed to your right, beyond Saouaf, the Italian operation and asked whether and which orders he received, and, in any case, what he intended to do. He was the Commander of the 47th *Panzergranadier* and his II battalion, which is assumed they remained isolated from the *Kampfgruppe Pfeiffer*. The Lt.Col. Hissmann said: "*The war in Africa is over. You do not shoot more.*" Scattini, who expected something, shrugged and arranged to have employed the new deployment to *Spezia*. Neither he, however, in his men were expecting the show that shortly after 07:00 of the 12th volunteered their eyes: the troops of 47th *Panzergranadiere*, armed and regularly framed by the officers, marched by threes in perfect order towards the enemy to go to surrender! He later met Gen. Koeltz: "... *I crossed columns of Pfeiffer Zaghuan detachment arrives: the grenadiers of the Afrika Korps, held in the desert, looks great* " ⁽⁷⁴⁾.

Nor was that all. Another surprise was the 90th Light, a wonderful division that in the two years of African campaign had offered truly superb demonstrations of its high quality. Gen. von Sponeck, invited to act on the constitution of the eastern side of the fort, declared that their battalions in Orlando, close to collapse, were no longer in condition to carry out the order: "*we disband - rebbero*" he explained ⁽⁷⁵⁾.

Orlando was also on the alert against the Germans. To receive preliminary provisions, von Sponeck had announced they did not feel able to accept, given the conditions of the units. Orlando said he would not accept discussions about this and that

he appealed to his skills as a brave commander. Shortly after von Sponeck sent for the officer to apologize to the previous communication and to ensure that the order would be executed properly ⁽⁷⁶⁾. Moreover Orlando for careful prudence, by pointing in advance, with nuclei armed with automatic and anti-tank weapons, the line on which the 90th was supposed to be arranged. Moreover, behind this division, where he was already inserted the II/1st *Giovani Fascisti*, he put the LXII/8th Bersaglieri, the only corps reserve. So 'therefore' the Germans remained passively in place ⁽⁷⁷⁾.

In the morning Messe in Rome he reported that the overall situation, the huge disproportion of forces and the progressive depletion of artillery ammunition left predict that resistance was no longer extended. The answer of Mussolini was clear:

"Then that the goal the resistance can be considered reached, left to VE free to accept honorable surrender. To you and to the heroic survivors of the 1st Army I renew my admired lively praise" ⁽⁷⁸⁾.

Messe then tried to get in radio contact with the Command of the British 8th Army. The message which indicated his willingness to negotiate the surrender "*with the honors of war*," pointing out that the Italian army was still in control of its positions ⁽⁷⁹⁾, was picked up by 10th Corps:

"Your compliance - he answered this-must be unconditional. The bombers are flying and will continue to be until you order your men to lay down their arms and surrender to the nearest Allied troops. You will have to enter our Enfidaville lines with white flag and present to the commander of the 56th division.

Then we examine the best means about the treatment of troops with the least possible disorder and bloodshed. The commander of the 10th Corps. Answering on this link. 16:35. "

Then came a second communication:

" 16:50 Hours. Following at previous message, Gen. Freyberg will meet with you to accept the surrender when you arrive at the Command of the 56th Division. "

Messe found the bite too bitter and dropped the matter, but the situation was literally falling. In the area of *Trieste* the *Luftwaffe* Battalion virtually surrendered en masse; in that of the *Giovani Fascisti* the II/361st *Panzer Grenadier* followed suit; from 17:30 onwards, the battalions of the 90th Light began to lay down their arms, one after another; at 19:00 von Sponeck also surrendered to the enemy. All this, while the Italian troops remained at their posts.

Even the guns were reduced to silence. On the orders of Gen. Belletti the latest salvo was preceded by cries of "*Long live the King! Long live the*

Artillery! "and, in front of the batteries on the presented arms, the pieces were destroyed.

Around 17:00 the radio station of the Commander of the army came in contact with the British 1st Army, who asked in Italian if he received the message of the 10th Corps. Messe replied: *"Yes. I do not have to repeat that the proposal to negotiate the surrender of the weapons on the basis of honor". "We have to understand - said the 1st Army - you rejected the unconditional surrender?"*. "Yes" confirmed Messe.

At 19^h35 he arrived the last telegram from Rome. It was personal for Messe: *"Stop fighting. You are appointed Marshal of Italy. Kudos to you & your warriors. Mussolini"* ⁽⁸⁰⁾.

From the other side there were overlaps. At 20:30 the transmission center of the 2nd New Zealand Division was instructed to send a new appeal: *"To 1st Army commander from the 10th Corps commander. The hostilities will not cease until all the troops will have thrown down their weapons and are surrendered to the nearest Allied unit"*.

But Messe while receiving another message of the English 1st Army with an invitation to send envoys to Bou Fichta. Halfway between that location and Enfidaville they would meet British representatives. With the opportunity was offered a truce. There was nothing to do. At 22:00, when the link was taken by Italian was announced the dispatch of a mission composed of Gen. Mancinelli and Col. Markert (Chiefs of Staff of the Italian and German Army), Major. Boscardi and interpreters. Messe immediately took issue orders for the enforcement of the truce, as it also destroyed during the night of all heavy and automatic infantry weapons and the few pieces still serviceable.

At 08:30 of the 13th a sudden attack of units of the Conne division against the sector of the 164th Light broke the long wait the outcome of the mission Mancinelli. The Germans reacted to the better, but of course entered the crisis with heavy weapons being destroyed. As he was being immediately addressed a protest to the commander of the 10th Corps, on the instructions of the army, Berardi sent Col. Ledda, Chief of G.S. of XXI Corps, to call for the enemy to respect the truce ⁽⁸¹⁾.

To carry out the mission of envoys, characterized by unpleasant incidents, see the report of Gen. Mancinelli ⁽⁸²⁾. The terms of surrender made by Freyberg were these:

"You will give your troops immediately to the following orders:

1. lay down their arms and surrender immediately to closest allied unit;
2. not destroy armaments and equipment;
3. provide plans of all known minefields in the area, delivering them to the closest allied unit.

Hostilities continue until you get given over to these measures. Their performance must be immediate and you will give notice by radio and by courier at what time your troops will surrender" ⁽⁸³⁾.

Messe agreed and pointed to Freyberg: "(...) *As to the weapons destruction, I can only give the order that from this moment for units to refrain from any further destruction.*" Then he informed the Comando Supremo and closed.

The last word it fell to Alexander: "*Lord – he telegraphed to Churchill - is my duty to inform you that the Tunisian campaign ended. All enemy resistance has ceased. We are masters of all the coasts of North Africa.*"

According to a calculation made by British official source, the total losses of the Axis, broken down by operating segment, the beginning of the battle of El Alamein to the final result would be the following ⁽⁸⁴⁾:

Period and sector	Italian			German			Total Gen
	dead and wounded	Prisoners	Total	dead and wounded	Prisoners	total	
10/23/42-3/19/43 (8 th Army)	19,000	25,400	44,400	22,000	9,200	31,200	85,600
11/08/42-3/10/43 (1 st Army)	1,500	1,400	2,900	3,000	2,200	5,200	8,100
3/20/43-5/5/43 (18 th Arm. Gr.):	12,600	24,700	37,300	23,200	9,400	32,600	69,600
5/5 – 5/10/43 (18 th Arm. Gr.)	1,000	62,000	63,000	9,000	148,000	157,000	220,700
Total	113,500	147,600	34,100	57,200	168,800	226,000	384,400

But even the total number of Axis prisoners in Tunisia are sure references. Alexander in his final report pointed to 250,000 men in round numbers and a calculation of the Command of the 18th Army Group soldiers captured on March 20 to May 13, was considered 157,000 Germans and 86,700 Italians, for a total of 244,500 prisoners. Eisenhower spoke of 240,000 men, including 125,000 Germans. Finally, the situation relating to Allied prisoners in concentration camps existing on the date of May 25, provides the following information:

German -----	10,1784
Italian -----	89,442
Nationality unspecified -----	47,017
A total of	238,243 ⁽⁸⁵⁾

The Army Group Africa could not provide exact figures, but according to the situation sent on May 2 at the Comando Supremo force fed in April had fluctuated between 170,000 and 180,000 men. A significant difference, then, unless the 47,000 prisoners of unspecified nationality had not been captured before 20 March.

Even the Allied losses in Tunisia there are differences in information. According to British source they were the following (86):

	dead	wounded	Missing	total
British:				
1 st Army	4,094	12,566	9,082	25,742
8 th Army	2,139	8,962	1,517	12,618
American	2,715	8,978	6,528	18,221
French	2,156	10,276	7,007	19,439

Second, however, American source ⁽⁸⁷⁾ they were:

	dead	wounded	Missing	total
British:				
1 st Army	4,439	12,575	6,531	25,545
8 th Army	2,036	9,055	1,304	2,395
American	2,715	8,978	6,528	18,221

NOTES TO CHAPTER VIII

- (1) DSCS, interview summary Ambrosio-Kesselring on 04/12/1943, at 19:00.
- (2) DSCS, interview summary Mussolini-Kesselring on 04/12/43 - Appendix n. 36.
- (3) DSCS, f. 31199 /Op. dated 04/12/1943.
- (4) DSCS, f. 91/43 dated 04/13/1943 of the OBS.
- (5) DS Commander 1st Army, tele 1170/Op. dated 04/08/1943 of Gen. Mattioli.
- (6) I.S.O. Playfair, *op. cited above*, p. 397.
- (7) The displacements of the units until 19 in April, as well as during the battle, placing the regiments of battalions complements resulting indicative changes and inserting freshly reconstituted battalions do not make the exact reconstruction of the positions easier. Add to that the inaccuracies or incompleteness found in the few available maps. Consequently, tried to get a reliable picture surely the mentioned date, but without the pretense of total precision.
- (8) DS Commander 1st Army, interview summary Kesselring-Messe of 16/04/1943 - Appendix n. 37. This document, based on the historical journal, differs from that derived from the cited official report of Mar. Messe (pp. 441-443 of the same).
- (9) Two days later the Messe asked the G.S. of the Army sending the order, the waiting boarding units: LI and VII Bers. Bn., III Bers. Bn. composed of 900 complements the 36th Inf. Bn. bis. destined to become the II/36th Inf., the III/131st art. 105/28, eleven semoventi of 75/18 and three groups of various field calibers. Also organic nine infantry battalions requested and all artillery groups available.
- (10) DSCS, interview summary Mussolini-Kesselring on 04/17/1943. Just that day Westphal had reported briefly to the Comando Supremo of the depressed morale of the Italian and German units (Appendix n. 38).
- (11) DS Commander 1st Army, dated 04/17/1943, summary of meeting held by the Messe with Commander XX Corp (Appendix no. 39) and the Commander XXI Corp (Appendix n. 40).
- (12) "Takrouna is Makalle - wrote in pen Gen. La Ferla on the order of operations *"Politi è Galliano"*.
- (13) Capt. Politi worship delivered by Gen. La Ferla an Italian and a German flag to signify the importance given to the Army the position and was really the need for it the defense to the extreme.
- (14) B. Montgomery, *Da El Alamein*, cit., P. 94.
- (15) I.S.O. Playfair, *op. cited above*, p. 402.
- (16) W.G. Stevens, *op. cited above*, p. 299.
- (17) Howard Kippenberger, *Infantry Brigadier*, Oxford University Press, London 1961, p. 307.
- (18) W.G. Stevens, *op. cited above*, p. 334.
- (19) *Ibid*, p. 339. From Indian source draws a clear vision of the dramatic struggle occurred on Djebel Garci: "In the darkness the men were facing fighting melee and slaughtering each other (...). Every piece of land reclaimed from the enemy provoked a counterattack by part of the men desperately committed to maintaining at all costs the heights of control. meter by meter, the attackers were advancing, bypassing rocky boulders, crossing mountain *wadis*, coming on top of a summit just to be in front of other dale peaks which came on them an incessant fire of mortars and light weapons "(Kenneth J. Macksay, *La fine in Africa*, in AA.VV. *Storia della seconda guerra mondiale*, Rizzoli-Purnell, vol. IV, Milan 1967, pp. 57-58).
- (20) DS Commander 1st Army, short interview von Arnim-Messe on 04/21/1943 - Appendix n. 41.
- (21) That evening, on the body of a fallen while trying to overcome the deep valley to the north of Takrouna, was found a direct message from the Capt. Politi to col. Pettinau, commander of the 66th Inf "19:30. *We have long been left without ammunition. All the weapons of Sardo [commander of the 4th areA] are out of order. In front of him the tanks have nailed the defense centers with bursts of machine guns and anti-tank fire of weapons. the enemy from the top of the mosque has ordered us to surrender. We have waited in vain for help.*

When it will be too late. The I/66th, the Folgore, the Grenadiers, the mortars fired to the last cartridge and you still fight with the latest energy left. If we make prisoners we can say we have beaten by real soldiers and had done our duty to the end. Long live Italy, long live the King".

- (22) H. Kippenberger, *op. cited above*, p. 312.
 - (23) DS Commander 1st Army, tele 3551/Op. dated 04/22/1943, 17:30.
 - (24) The agenda of von Arnim was thus conceived: *"The 1st Army maintained in an exemplary way its positions 20 to 22 April in violent defensive battles under an incessant artillery fire. My full praise goes to all the army and particularly the military units of the III/47th Gren., I/361st Arm. Gren., II/433th Arm. Gren., Luftwaffe Battalion and the Italian garrison of Takrouna, I/65th".*
- For the story: the II/433rd was actually wrought valiantly much to be proposed by Messe for quotation on bulletin Q.G. the Armed Forces; the III/47th had not provided good account at Djebel Bir, with known consequences; the I/361st was not committed and the Battalion of the Luftwaffe had been very little. Finally the garrison of Takrouna the I/66th and not the I/65th of the *Trieste*.
- (25) W.G. Stevens, *op. cited above*, p. 341.
 - (26) I.S.O. Playfair, *op. cited above*, p. 442.
 - (27) W.G. Stevens, *op. cited above*, p. 342.
 - (28) *Ibid*, p. 351.
 - (29) DS Commander 1st Army, f. 3691/Op. dated 04/26/1943 - Appendix n. 42.
 - (30) Counting on the announced arrival VII and LI Bersaglieri battalions well 900 complements the Commander 1st Army had directed in rehabilitating the Bersaglieri regiment on the following basis. The 5th Battalion XIV of sharpshooters. (Destined to absorb the LI) and XXIV Battalion. (With 100 additions). The 7th Bersaglieri with the V Battalion (With 200 complements), VII and XII of the coming inflow (with 300 complements). The 8th bersaglieri with the X Battalion. (With absorption of L Battalion.), XI (with 80 complements) and LVII (with 170 complements). The failed hope to receive the complements induced him to dissolve the 7th Bersaglieri to revitalize the 5th, but the unexpected transfer of this to Mateur, in the 5th Army sector, prevented him to act on the measure.
 - (31) The intervention of the Army Group on the use of the German units of the 1st Army had made a formal appearance at least singular. For example, on April 24 Bayerlein informed the 1st Army Commander: "The Army Group order: the German paratroopers battalion depends with immediate effect by the Army Group and held ready for departure for a new job regardless of the tasks so far had "" (DS 1st Army Command, dated 04/24/1943).
 - (32) DS Commander 1st Army, tele 034305/Ord. On 04/27/1943, at 18:00.
 - (33) W.G. Stevens, *op. cited above*, p. 352. it is that for a brief moment Montgomery were advanced suspects had the idea to throw ahead the 8th Army at any price in order to secure the lead role in the final victory. It seems that in the face of such a prospect, Horrocks has commented: *"We will breakthrough, but I doubt that in the end will still exist a lot of the 8th Army!"*.
 - (34) I.S.O. Playfair, *op. cited above*, p. 442.
 - (35) Alexander H., *op. cited above*, p. 34.
 - (36) DS Commander 1st Army, report on the battle of Enfidaville - Appendix n. 43.
 - (37) While the 5th Army and the DAK were busy to replenish a defensive line just stopping capacity, Messe said bluntly to dream that, by what was happening, it was little hope about the implementation of a XXX Corp sector on the German side. So he thought of proposing the repatriation of Command. Sogno did then that basically the situation could stabilize and reinforcements had to flow from Italy, and also that he would return, albeit apparently, decreased the Italian contribution to the Tunisian campaign. Messe accepted the considerations and postpone.
 - (38) The level of strength of the divisions varied. The division von Manteuffel could count on 4,500 men, the 334th on 9500, the *Hermann Goering* on 10,000, the 10th Panzer on 10,000, the 999th on 5,800. The *Superga* had approximately 10,000 men and 21st Panzer on 5,500.

- the 999th Inf. Bd. was composed mainly of military convicts and sent to the front to rehabilitate themselves.
- (39) Gelich complained that, despite having been considered for some time, in secret, the possibility of a retreat to the line-Fkirine Saouaf-Enfidaville, no work had been sketched south of Pont du Fahs to make the static defense easy, but we know the extreme shortage of reinforcing materials and probably this factor engraved on the lack of timely measures.
- (40) The troops of the Benigni sector included the divisional Infantry Command, the Command 91st infantry, the I/91st Inf., The *Grado* Battalion., XXIV/5th Bers., 570th Tunisia CC.NN. Bn., the A-28 Battalion., The Command 29th.art. Group of Corps., the LVII/29th art. of 105/32 and LXV/5th art. of 100/17.
- (41) The Col. Dispensa had the I and III/92nd Inf., The I Tunisian German volunteers Battalion. and A-25 Battalion., with II/92nd Inf. in reserve. The Lt. Col. Stolz had at his disposal the German battalions A-22, A-28, I and II/69th *Panzergranadiere*, I and II/961st infantry and Italian II/91st Inf. as well as the I and II/91st and of the *Grado* Battalion in reserve.
- (42) L. Koeltz, *op. cited* above, p. 324.
- (43) The armored grouping La Couteulx was formed by three squads of *Valentine*, one of *Somua*, a destroyer and one of *Stuart*.
- (44) The 21st *Panzer* had remained with the following Italian troops: the Versé Machine gun Bn. with three companies to defend airports, the LX Machine gun Bn. of two companies, the V CC.NN. Bn. and XXII Pioneer Bn. of the army corps.
- (45) Upon the *Superga* retreat north of the pass of Sidi Saleh, subsector east was initially entrusted to the Col. Incisa, commander of the 5th artillery. The command post was installed in one of the not numerous, small and not very capable of surrounding houses south of Saouaf-Pont du Fahs road. On it he put the eye on the Col. Lang, who took over at the Gen. Hildebrandt in command of the 21st *Panzer* and in charge of organizing a defensive sector between the 1st Army and *Superga*. During a temporary absence of the Col. Incisa, German officers of the 21st *Panzer* came to the Commander of the 5th artillery asking locals. Of course the official highest Italian can present refused. At that moment there came the Col. Lang, who invested his employees harshly for indecision proved and ordered, arms in hand, Italians were thrown out, including banner of the regiment. The circumspect behavior of the Italian official was able to avoid the recklessness of Lang derived a bloody clash, but obviously the incident came quickly to the Commander of the Army Group. Faced with indignant Italian protest, the German High Commander expressed full regret and made to repatriate Col. Lang, whose psychic exhaustion conditions - he said - it was certainly due the incident. It must be said, for objectivity, that Lang had behaved most brilliantly in the numerous battles sustained earlier.
- (46) L. Koeltz, *op. cited* above, p. 342.
- (47) The incident gave rise to an acrimonious communication of DAK, when he was asked the name of the "guilty" of the incident and complained that the necessary counter to the restoration of the situation were to lie to German troops who would certainly have suffered severe losses. Gelich, even before the intervention of Sogno, said that the Italian side there was a "guilty" and that the accident was due to faulty own DAK provisions.
- Meanwhile the Lt. Col. Broccoli, who went to check the situation, was seriously wounded. He was replaced as head of G.S. connection with the DAK from Lt. Col..
- Invrea.
- (48) L. Koeltz, *op. cited* above, p. 347.
- (49) Apparently, though, were surfaced clear symptoms of an imminent German disorder action. 1117 a prisoner had admitted that *Hermann Goering* was about to launch an attack with the fresh troops. Interceptions between 17 and April 19 indicated probable *Panzer* raid south of Bab el Medjez (F.H. Hinsley, *op. Cited* above, p. 610).
- (50) In the battle of the 25th the Piscicelli Arm. group, although damaged by an inadvertent *Stuka* attack, behaved very well, so as to merit a favorable

comments in the report of the 15th Panzer; the group "did a magnificent counterattack; Italians have fought brilliantly, it should first be cited the Major Piscicelli; were destroyed 28 enemy tanks and an observatory. Losses Italian tanks: 4 destroyed, many" failures.

- (51) O. Bradley, *op. cited* above, p. 113.
 - (52) G. Howe, *op. cited* above, pp. 614-617.
 - (53) K.J. Macksey, *op. cited* above, p. 59.
 - (54) DSCS dated 04/26/1943.
 - (55) F.F. Hinsley, *op. cited* above, p. 611.
 - (56) The 9th corps included: 6th and 7th Armored Division, 4th Indian and 4th British, 25th Tank Brigade (less than two regiments) and 201st Guards Brigade.
 - (57) Evidently the Italian troops mentioned in the message were those transferred to the 5th *Panzerarmee*. The Comando Supremo persisted in attempts to "moral reasons", against the explicit opinion of Supermarina, and had to forcibly accept unavoidable losses. So on April 30 they were sunk three destroyers with about 900 men, and in the night on May 4 exploded a steamer of ammunition and torpedo boat escort, after a long battle against three British destroyers. Other vessels sank just arrived in Tunisia and even before unloading the little they carried.
 - (58) Gen. Manteuffel and Weber were repatriated because they become ill. Similarly sick, Gen. Bayerlein was replaced by Colonel. Markert as head of the G.S. of the German army.
 - (59) L. Koeltz, *op. cited* above, p. 354.
 - (60) *Ibid.* This belief stemmed from information provided by prisoners, where an officer of the Italian G.S.. If so, Koeltz must refer to information gathered after the capitulation.
 - (61) Report of Gen. Marshall for the period from July 1941 to 30 June 1943.
 - (62) I.S.O. Playfair, *op. cited* above, p. 451.
 - (63) *Ibid.* For directives von Arnim vds. Appendix. 44. The failure to defense of Tunis there are reasons for doubt about the precise interpretation of the orders. The in depth concept of von Arnim consisted in wanting to avoid the destruction of the city, hitherto almost untouched (Bizerte had already suffered, however, serious damage), which however did not mean the renunciation of fighting the outskirts of the town. According to Messe, in fact, at 20:00 of May 7, the Commander of Army Group Africa sent an officer right in Tunis in the belief that the resistance was in place.
- Apart from that, it is certain that on the morning of the 7th the commander of the Italian garrison in vain solicited orders for the defense from Gen. Schnarrenberg, German commander of the fort. When, at about 15:00, a patrol of British armored car slipped in central Tunis
- "Hundreds of Germans were walking through the streets, some with their girls. Others take a drink, sit in cafes. No one had informed them that the British were at the doors" (Alan Moorehead, *The war in the desert*, Garzanti, Milan 1968 p. 297).
- (64) On that day the Allied Command in Algiers deciphered a Japanese ambassador's message to Rome, where the diplomat informed that he had learned from Mussolini all hope of evacuation from Tunisia came to fall (F.H. Hinsley, *op. cited* above, p. 613).
 - (65) L. Koeltz, *op. cited* above, p. 363.
 - (66) The commander of the *Hermann Goering*, Gen. Schmidt, repatriated May 9 by order of Goering.
 - (67) The Gen. Sogno was repatriated in the night of 8 May by order of the Comando Supremo.
 - (68) As of May 9 the Comando Supremo calculated in Tunisia Italian a residual force of 91,000 officers and non-commissioned officers and 4,200 troops, of which 10,000 belong to the Navy and Aviation.
 - (69) The Gen. Gause, head of G.S. the Army Group, did not return to Tunisia from Rome, where he had gone on the 4th to attend a conference.
 - (70) The Gen. Silvio Rossi, chief of the Comando Supremo operations department, reflects on a table that had filled about repatriations by air from Tunisia, with Italian aircraft, in the last three months. It resulted from it that in March had been

repatriated 5,415 men, in April 5,351 and in the first decade of May 85. This included Italian and German military personnel, civilians and prisoners. The average man / machine was equal to 7.29 in March, 11.73 in April and 14.16 in May, against a possibility of load of 25-28 men per aircraft. Rossi noted with bitterness that had not been exploited even clearing capabilities of our aircraft and May 7 there were 21,000 men in Tunis awaiting repatriation.

- (71) In his report Gen. Gelich told: *"Meanwhile a true flood of German troops, coming from all directions, marched in small units close to the command of innumerable white flags waving division, the German liaison officer, Lt. Col. Stolz, with his staff, he told me that folded towards the seat of the DAK and asked if I wanted to do the same. I replied that my troops were completely at the hands of their commanders (and in fact no white flag had been lifted from them), and that I never would have given up to command to the end and follow the fortunes"*.
- (72) W. Churchill, *op. cited* above, p. 413.
- (73) The letter was couched in these terms: "I have known and fought your division from the moment it was formed. Today I ask for the first time to surrender. Further fighting is useless. You know how small the possibility of a withdrawal by the way of Hammamet and even smaller ones to escape by sea or by air. Keep fighting is only meant to hinder our future plans, but this is too late. In three days we can wipe out your division. Do not let your troops die unnecessarily. If you keep fighting, Germany will praise suffered as a hero, but later will judge more justly that you have sacrificed your soldiers. The 334th division, Manteuffel and 15th as well as the division of the air arm *Hermann Goering* have laid down their arms. According to statements of prisoners will surrender soon also the 10th Armored Division. You have resisted to the end and you surrender now with all the honors. I await a prompt reply. Lt. Gen. Freyberg. "
- (74) L. Koeltz, *op. cited* above, p. 373.
- (75) G. Messe, *op. cited* above, p. 266.
- (76) T. Orlando, *op. cited* above, p. 62.
- (77) the two versions, have been reported of Mar. Messe and of Gen. Orlando, that They are complementary. It is also necessary to remark that lack secure elements to reconstruct exactly the last twenty-four hours of the 90th Light.
- (78) DSCS, tele 31454/Op. date 05/12/1943, hours 11:15. similar telegram (n. 31455 / Op.) It was sent by the Comando Supremo to von Arnim, but he had already surrendered.
- (79) The text was as follows: *"After long heroic struggle waged against the troops of the 8th Army always with a spirit of chivalry, the Army keeps all its positions intact. In order to avoid further bloodshed, the Army is willing to negotiate the surrender with the honors of war. If so I propose immediate truce. Please answer indicating the same place means & hour meeting submitted to my Parliamentarians."*
- (80) DSCS, tele 31458/Op. On 05/12/1943, at 19:35.
- (81) According Koeltz, Col. Ledda would be presented at the Gen. Conne into the night on the 13th to negotiate the surrender of the XXI Corps (*op. Cited* above, p. 375), but this version does not refer exactly to the terms of Ledda mission.
- (82) See Appendix. 45.
- (83) G.W. Stevens, *op. cited* above, p. 367.
- (84) I.S.O. Playfair, *op. cited* above, p. 460.
- (85) G. W. Stevens, *op. cited* above, p. 386.
- (86) I.S.O. Playfair, *Ibid*. For the 1st Army losses shall run from 11/8/1942, for the 8th Army from 09/29/1943; for Americans since 12/11/1942
- (87) G. Howe. *op. cited*. p.675. The effect of the losses and the 12/11/1942 for Americans and from 11/8/1942 for the British 1st Army.

Chapter Nine

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It would seem appropriate, in the final remarks, address a look to all the various events that took place in North Africa from 1940 to 1943, but similar summary critic would, in fact, to leave more dissatisfied than satisfied. The campaigns in North Africa are an integral part of the war fought by Italy of so many and such diverse theaters of operation that probably Badoglio, if in 1940 he had imagined such a possibility, it would be scared portrait and would find the energy to brutally oppose Mussolini. Because, as you rightly said Giorgio Rochat in an acute analysis, "the real problem of our historical and political 1940-1943 war is not the final defeat, but the demonstration of substantial inferiority of which the Italian Armed Forces gave evidence at all stages and campaigns of the war" ⁽¹⁾.

Separate incidents of Africa than of Russia or the Balkans or the Mediterranean, or the political solutions to the summit, It is acceptable only when interest principally to examine the development of military operations in the specific theater. But as soon as you want to understand why certain decisions or the causes of certain situations, here emerge the inevitable limitations of a study, to be conscientious that, at least in intention, focused attention on the local strategy and tactics, large and small, with which the opposing armies faced each other. Not surprisingly, after all, it has sometimes were to the advantage, and even the need, to look up from the theater of operations in Africa.

For the purposes of a full understanding of the origin of certain choices war events should, in essence, to consider the topic war 1940-43 as a whole and in its political, economic, social as well as military, and this is beyond the scope of this work. For this reason, we prefer not to go on campaigns in the desert up to El Alamein and instead dwell only on that of Tunisia.

The point of departure is of the unpreparedness political and military campaign and the inadequacy of the means by which the enterprise began and continued. Unpreparedness and inadequacy that is painful and irritating to say, were accompanying our arms from the unfortunate June 10, 1940.

You do not want much emphasizes the hands on the lack of understanding of the proximity, and, still more likely that the Allied landings in North Africa, the liabilities on the political-diplomatic front inviolability of the French colonies stubbornly wanted by Hitler, as the timidity of the Comando Supremo in asking OKW least the transit of supplies through Tunisia. But if these findings can

find justification unable to force the Germans, or rather the person of Hitler, to change the order of ideas, it seems that two different lack of foresight have color exclusively Italian. On the political and diplomatic lacked any attempt to create an atmosphere favorable to us, if not to activate a strong partnership; as uncertain the outcome, it was not even attempted, and the Delegation of Italian Armistice left Tunisia in the aftermath of the Anglo-American landings without giving any information and suggestions of any kind to the first Italian troops sent in place. On the military side stands the absence of realistic and effective measures for operation C 4. Sogno was explicit:

"(...) What exists, and can not be disputed, is that any establishment by the Italian, was in place in relation to the possibility manifested. Who directed by terrestrial, the preparation of the expedition to Corsica and took care of several times to update, can recall the reality and the thoroughness of the measures studied and controlled with prolonged and accurate processing (...) so that (...) transactions had to take place automatically and simultaneously, to the various groups involved, the simple 'way' ordered by the Comando Supremo; since similar preparation had not been made, but not with equal thoroughness even drafted, could not obviously eliminated the consequences of improvisation, whatever the availability and performance of the enforcement organ and means that could be used."⁽²⁾ .

The Allied air raids on Tunis and Bizerte began on November 22 and for the entire month of November, attacks on convoys to Tunisia were made almost exclusively by submarines, with the sinking only of the motorship ship *Città di Napoli* due to a mine (28 November). In this period were transported by sea 13,302 people (including 1,377 German), with 1,600 vehicles and 17,000 tons of various materials and fuel. That was all. Yet on November 15 Adm. Riccardi had written to Cavallero, among other things:

"The traffic with Tunisia has started. It may be stepped up and maintained as necessary to bring the food and the occupation *forces* as long as *all* of our mass means do for it."

Surely engraved negatively the contemporary course of C 2, Sogno still noted:

"Do not forget that for the operation of Malta, in August, we had expected the simultaneous transport, both on the Special Equipment to be landing on ships, of three divisions (*Superga*, *Livorno* and *Friuli*) and a armored grouping if we *were* not capable, in November, in an effort to Tunisia comparable to that provided for Malta, the reason can not be sought, as well as in the unpreparedness shipment and losses suffered in the meantime, in the contemporary occupation of Corsica.

Appears, after that, obviously, it is not at all impossible to give the first landings in Tunisia major proportions, our *forces* landed, would henceforth be able to assume a much more decided to initial the French troops that cleared the eastern Tunisia and that have collected on the ridge of Tunisia There had assumed function of advanced coverage (...) ' ⁽³⁾.

Operation *Torch* settled the final blow to any hope of favorably resolve the struggle in North Africa and the Mediterranean. What solution to the serious strategic problem or, to put it simply, what to do in those situations was a question of heavy responsibility. Wanting to reduce everything to resort to a maneuver retreating very elastic and re active, the matter was left in the hands of the military leadership of the operation. If you take into account the abandonment of North Africa, the issue became political because of its immense repercussions in all fields.

The only one to invoke a radical decision was Rommel, however, devoid of political responsibility and military concerns in practice limited to Germanic units. Also, let us say, of him they acted on several factors. The severe lack of resources and materials, the more problematic that opportunity to revitalize the ACIT, the striking disproportion between forces and task, the divergent conceptual orientations in operational matters, the lack of confidence in the top chain of command (Comando Superiore Libya and the Comando Supremo, OBS and OKW) created a state of tension is not easy to bear for a commander for some time on the rope. Moreover, his body was tried and gave unmistakable signs of abating. In this context it becomes widely understood the immediate final attempt to save the army and especially German troops.

For objectivity must be acknowledged that go suddenly from El Alamein to re-embarkation of ACIT - allowing to lose all the territorial organization of Libya, including civilians - could not see a precipitous move. However, within a couple of months it appeared the need to follow a well-defined course of action. Any solution would be tough and full of unknowns. It had to choose between two extremes. The sacrifice of the troops of Africa, extending the endurance to gain sufficient time to strengthen defenses in Sicily and Sardinia, would have involved sending substantial reinforcements in units, weapons and materials. The alternative to recover the recoverable amount of the armies, leaving the rest to his fate, would have allowed the further availability of expert units in metropolitan.

Cavallero demurred: he ended up putting off the decision hoping for better times. The choice of Ambrosio was forced: there was no denying a minimum oxygen to those who fought bravely trusting in the Motherland. Mussolini was limited to rhetorical statements, but it is obvious that never would have allowed such a spontaneous abandonment of North Africa, if it was that they came to fight in Tunisia, massive eviction was still possible. Hitler in the Rastenburg, in December 1942, proclaimed that the possession of Tunisia closed the Mediterranean to navigation ally for six months, even as the U-boat campaign was reaching the pinnacle of success and the ability of American production

was not yet in full working order. Moreover, in August 1943, he had to justify the Tunisian campaign in other ways. First, it sent back the invasion of Europe by six months; secondly, he had prevented Italy to break away from the alliance at a crucial time. If Italy had left the field, he said, "*the Allies could land on the peninsula and on up to the Brenner ... When, because of the breakthrough Russian at Stalingrad, Germany would not have had one man to oppose them.*" It is obvious, however, that both dictators saw spontaneous abandonment of Tunisia a fierce blow to their personal prestige.

The conduct of Axis operations in Tunisia does not acquire real weight up to the action of *Eilbote I* (18-20 January 1943). Until then he had simply pointed to various consistencies designed to test the extent of the Allied forces or to drive out from a single location to improve the defense of the beachhead. Considering that basically *Eilbote* prevailed to ease the pressure of the enemy in the sector of the *Superga*, rather than take the initiative, you must then get to operations *Frublingswind* (Feb. 14 to 15) on Sbeitla and *Morgenluft* (15 February) on Gafsa, Preliminary to the Battle of Kasserine, to find an autonomous Italian-German offensive.

The maneuver was designed following the example of *Eilbote I*, but this had been successful both for the surprise resulting from its abnormal development, both because waged against French troops unprepared for the impact and promptly supported by Allied armored units. In addition, von Arnim had issued extremely cautious directives to the 5th Army, without organizing actions of relevant entities in conjunction with the effort of Rommel. We know how it ended the only real attempt to disrupt the Allied deployment in the west.

When the ACIT moved into Tunisia, the war in the Mediterranean was lost. Anyone wishing to see it was clear that nothing could literally change the events and their course. As was inevitable destruction, or the surrender of the Army Group Africa. Now, maintaining the Tunisian bridgehead it was justified if really needed to improve the defense of the great Italian islands or until the allowed recovery of units considered too valuable to let them fall into enemy hands without purpose.

Messe observed that the Comando Supremo had adopted the solution to feed the resistance of the troops overseas without dedicate the firm determination necessary because the high price to be viable. But "when you think - he confessed to Gen. Francis Rossi, deputy chief of the G..S. General - and to boost its troops in Tunisia we were even forced to remove the machine guns, anti-tank weapons and the like to the troops in Sicily, with no possibility of immediate reinstatement (apart from the deleterious moral reflections on the troops); It understands how the expansion of Tunisia was going to give the total efficiency of Sicily, ie of the Motherland"⁽⁴⁾.

In fact the defense posture of Sicily and Sardinia appeared seriously worrying. Without going into details about the forces of the two islands, and especially in Sicily, the most exposed, we will say that the coastal defense revealed itself a daunting inefficiency and modesty mobile without equal, and that the Comando Supremo, although aware of this, he had no way to provide adequately ⁽⁵⁾. On February 8, von Rintelen had communicated to the OKW that the Italian armed forces did not seem able to counter a landing in a big way. By Germanic tried to satisfy as far as possible the insistent demands of Italian supply of large quantities of modern weapons, but also of German war production was in crisis and by April only Sardinia received a first batch of 19 pieces.

The commander of the 1st Army, realizing the many aspects of the reinforcement problem, he added in his report: "The oscillating behavior of the Comando Supremo is then reason to exist even in the obvious contradiction between the *optimistic* forecasts, in terms of transport, the High Commissioner for supplies in the Mediterranean [sic], Marshal Kesselring, and the inexorable reality expressed by the lists of the sinking. The fact is that in every inter-allied meeting Marshal Kesselring took the balm of a smiling as unjustified optimism: the air forces under his command would ensure the passage. It was said ironically that he foisted cocaine on the Comando Supremo; but the action of the drug was fleeting and the disappointment of failure was ever more bitter. "

Kesselring, in truth, insisted until the last to allow and encourage the struggle in Tunisia. It was led by a great optimism to the recognition in perspective meaning and purpose of the theater. He had convinced the OKW and it was in turn influenced: hold the bridgehead for quite some time and it was possible to give up the fight one should not even talk about it. Moreover, on May 4 at a meeting held at the Palazzo Venezia, which Gen. Gause also participated, called to show the evolution of the operations in Tunisia, claimed to not judge yet the desperate situation: "*We need to rely on small means. If they were available three hundred landing craft, the problem of supplies would be solved*" ⁽⁶⁾.

He attributed the loss of Tunisia to substantial underestimation on the part of the Axis of the importance of the North African theater, which did not allow to take full advantage of the favorable opportunities for victory; insufficient attention paid to the organization and security of supplies by sea and air, from which came the gradual shutdown supply logistics; excessive condescension towards France, which gave the inviolability of Tunisia until the last moment. And finally called into question the issue of the Chief of the Staff General.

Kesselring had immediately realized the significance of the "changing of the guard". Ambrosio, in fact, announced in no uncertain terms the intention

to think first and foremost to Italian interests and left shine the desire not to get hooked hopelessly in Tunisia. He could not, however, take decisions of such strategic importance without the permission of those who held the political control of the war, that of Mussolini, and without even a semblance of consent ally, now accused of destructive selfishness. He not for nothing at the end of March the OKW made it known that, completed sending several thousand men, the remainder of the *Hermann Goering* and the 999th Inf. Bd, would not send more troops. Inevitably, therefore, all the persistent work of Kesselring to guide the Italian strategic leadership in the desire of the OKW was soon at odds with the steadfast will of Ambrosio to free themselves from the German tutelage became unbearable. Von Rintelen knew it, he tried to bring in some way the two parties, but to no noteworthy avail ⁽⁷⁾.

"Excessive docility and hostility too obvious - Kesselring later commented - caused equally the most serious damage. The situation became intolerable after the withdrawal of Marshal Cavallero from the post of Chief of Staff of the Italian armed forces and replacing him with the army chief, General Ambrosio. This change had to result in a complete change in my relationship with the Italian command. I had warned the Duce on the consequences of the withdrawal of Cavallero and of the appointment given to Ambrosio; but since my warnings were not listened to, I asked to be relieved from command. Following the fervent prayers of the leader, who assured me a "fraternal", unfortunately I gave up to replace me. I suspect that since then, as now, it was found, it began arguing in Italians circles the possibility of a future separation of Italy from Germany" ⁽⁸⁾.

In part, however, the "disconnect" increasingly evident at the highest levels, we must not forget the more serious lack of understanding among the German leaders in Tunisia: friction, misunderstandings and rivalries between Rommel and von Arnim for sure damage to the success of the Axis offensive in February. The end result of the campaign would not be changed course, however, to that of the same allies, the backlash would have been much heavier.

On a practical level, the wear and tear suffered by the armored forces in Kasserine is added to similar and even heavier Medenine. Kesselring expressed outright dissatisfaction: this last battle, in his opinion, "*found significant weaknesses in the control and execution.*" He was convinced that it was necessary now to adapt to the defensive and that therefore there was nothing to do. Von Arnim, who initially had shown very confident, while understanding the difficulties inherent in a situation that placed in the foreground the absolute need to keep open the channel of supply with the still far away ACIT, soon, with response of poverty reinforcements and supplies, resented the

dramatic contingencies. When he assumed command of the Army Group, its course of action appeared frequently indecisive, tending to the use of piecemeal although limited reserves, and the measures taken were sometimes delayed and sometimes seemed ill suited to the circumstances. Moreover Messe and Sogno, unanimously, they saw a real soldier in the soul and spirit.

Rommel, in 1944, after the invasion of Normandy, wrote down his impressions in retrospect. He also accused the Comando Supremo and in particular the OKW had lost in North Africa a truly exceptional. He poses two questions: a better allocation of units of the *Luftwaffe* would enable them to achieve air supremacy over the Mediterranean and gain supply security in favor of the ACIT? A better distribution of the troops of the *Wehrmacht* would have allowed the recovery of armored divisions and motorized to the campaign in North Africa? On the first question answered affirmatively: drawing from the Air Force located in France, Denmark and Norway have been possible to achieve adequate superiority in the Mediterranean and take Malta. Responsible for non initiative was the "*evil influence*" of Goering.

Also he gave an affirmative answer to the second question. It is true that Halder had declared in 1941 that the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* was sent overseas "non repayable" by the OKW, just to continue for as long as possible the collapse of the Italian resistance, and after all that Germany could not have been supplying more than two or three divisions, but for Rommel Similar objections were risible. In fact, according to him, "*The OKW and OKH held a passive attitude that must be defined simply irresponsible.*"

Because in 1941 and 1942 did not expect an invasion in style in France or elsewhere, nothing prevented to transport to Africa some inactive divisions scattered in the West and also in Germany. Resulting in increased availability of motorized troops would be able to get "*more or less*" the following results. First, beat and destroy the 8th Army, which would have paved the way beyond the Suez Canal, forced Britain to a standstill for at least a few months to carry more troops in the Middle East, and then allowed the axis to advance into Persia and Iraq, to occupy the oil fields and to cut the Russians off from Basra. Soon after would be created in Mesopotamia the basis for an offensive in a big way against the Caucasian front and, in the meantime, Finland's action was isolated Murmansk, thus completing the interruption of the huge flow of US supplies to the USSR. Finally, the ultimate strategic goal: the oil fields of Baku. All this would put "*the premises strategic to break down with the Russian giant concentric blows*" ⁽⁹⁾.

Rommel admitted that these his views did not meet the favor of the OKW, which rejected them rather as entirely fanciful, and indeed it is difficult to consider them without a deep skepticism, knowing

that in 1942, after the recapture of Tobruk by the Axis, the Allies did not hide serious concern about the fate of the Middle East and on the premises of the Russian front. The fact remains that he had strengthened and nurtured the ACIT when possible and in the due constitutes a strategic error of the first magnitude.

About the conduct of the operations from the other side is very little to say, given the widely differing forces existing between the two warring parties. Accuracy organizational of *Torch* does not seem to be matched by an adequate development of the invasion: a greater boldness and an expansion of the landings to the east would have probably allowed to put in serious difficulties and the hasty creation of confused Italian-German bridgehead. Also in terms of command things did not go smoothly. Perhaps the difficulties with Darlan, De Gaulle and Giraud were not exactly configured in advance, but spent less than four months before the command of all Allied forces were really entrusted to a single commander Alexander.

On the Allied plate of the scale weighed greatly the American logistical organization, an organization of pragmatism and a wealth of material for us unthinkable. "Huge amounts of supplies, ammunition, and vehicles of war materials of all kinds flowed into North African ports - described Cunningham - and in one day, in the beginning of February, there were eighty merchant ships, between full and empty, in the Port of Algiers"⁽¹⁰⁾. Losses from November 1942 to March 1943, touched just 2.4% of total gross tons.

Conversely - the observation of Gen. Koeltz - this abundance of resources influenced the tactics of both the Americans and the British. The calculation of the requirements was made on a basis "for the rich" and until the levels deemed necessary in every field were not achieved the action was not taken. Consequently, it could happen that waiting too protracted did miss the favorable opportunity and gave the initiative to the opponent. Of course for Italian and German logistics it was that of the poor and in tactical field became imperious make up for the mass with the local concentration and temporary means, surprise and speed of movement⁽¹¹⁾.

The bulletin n. 1083 of 13 May issued by the Supreme Command announced:

"The Italian 1st Army, which has had the honor of the last Axis resistance in Africa, ceased this morning, on the orders of the Duce, the combat.

Subjected to the action concentric and uninterrupted all the Anglo-American forces land and air, run out of ammo, now devoid of any supply, it still had yesterday strongly supported the just value of its infantry, the enemy shock. Thus it ended the African battle for life, with the ups and downs, thirty-five months (...). "

On the same day the OKW made a similar announcement, stating that "our troops have been overwhelmed by the lack of supplies

and not under the assaults of the enemy, that so many times, in the same theater of operations, had to bow before the superiority of our weapons." Rightly, von Eisebeck poses accentuated as for the first and only time the OKW has confessed openly that, in spite of all the promises of aid and any peremptory order, the troops in Libya first in Tunisia and then had lacked the means necessary to fight in acceptable conditions ⁽¹²⁾.

Overcoming the Sicilian Channel: here's the problem. In the first few days of December I happened two facts that weighed greatly on the so-called "third battle of the convoys". The proximity of Bona, where *Force Q* (Rear Admiral Harcourt) had been installed, and Malta offered the Allies the possibility of using surface ships against Axis shipping traffic along the intervening little more than twenty miles from Sicily to Tunisia. In the night on 2 December they were at sea four convoys Italian. Convoy B, consisting of three Italian ships and two German and four torpedo boats of escort, reinforced by the three destroyers of the *Maestrale* squadron after laying a barrage of mines, had left Naples for Tunisian ports in the early afternoon of 30 November. Convoy C, consisting of three merchant ships and four torpedo boats of the escort, had sailed from Naples to Tripoli around midnight on the 30th. Convoy G, limited to a tanker with an escort of a destroyer and a torpedo boat, had left Palermo for Tunis on 9 December. Convoy H, consisting of three Italian and a German merchant ship had left Palermo for Bizerte at 10:00 of 1 December, with an escort of three destroyers and torpedo boats ⁽¹³⁾.

At 17:30 *Force Q*, informed by the aerial survey of the movements taking place as well as a promptly decrypted *Enigma* message ⁽¹⁴⁾, he came from Bona at high speed. Adm. Harcourt considered trappable convoys H and G, or at least one of the two. Just after midnight Convoy H appeared on the radar screen. At 12:37 he left the first British salvo. "For the enemy was a real tragedy -wrote Adm. Cunningham - Four supply ships or transports and three destroyers, attacked at close range, were sunk or burnt. It was a horrible scene of ships that were exploding on fire in clouds of steam and smoke; of men throwing themselves at sea while their ships sank; of vehicles on deck and they slipped and tumbled into the sea as their ships capsized. I do not know how many men the enemy has lost, as fuel for transport and military supplies; it is certain that not one vessel of that convoy survived"⁽¹⁵⁾. Indeed they sank four ships and a destroyer, while a destroyer and a torpedo boat were damaged. No loss British. The convoy was carrying 1,766 soldiers, 698 tons of military equipment, 12 pieces of 88 mm. with its equipment, 32 vehicles and 4 tanks. As Convoy G, the *tanker* was attacked and set on fire by planes coming from Malta.

On 4 December, also it took place the great bombardment of Naples, which has been discussed previously, and that caused serious damage to ships at anchor. The result was the decentralization of the Italian fleet: battleships and cruisers to La Spezia and the 3rd Division to La Magdalene. They stayed in the south, in Messina, only the 8th Division that will end in January also to leave the area and move to Taranto. Therefore, regardless of the availability of naphtha, the squadron came to be so far away from the crucial sector of the Mediterranean to be seen precluded any possibility of timely intervention. "The transfer to La Spezia was, therefore, the withdrawal from the struggle of those battleships that until then, directly or indirectly, had been the centerpiece of the Italian war in the Mediterranean: the fate of Italy had fatally fallen" ⁽¹⁶⁾.

Meanwhile, also at the insistence of Germany, he had continued in the laying of large barriers of mines, so that the routes to Tunis and Bizerte proceeded for some distance between two protective barriers (sketch n. 90). British raids as that of 2 December were no longer feasible and even incursions of submarines, however, the enemy, as they detect the corridor, resorted to a fast cruisers minelayer: at night these dropped mines in the passage, they posed new mined areas and fell behind before dawn. In total, From January to put 19 minefields with about 2,000 mines, whose discovery usually occurred at the expense of ships calling after getting into it. In essence, the hall was gradually to shrink up to determine a bottleneck of forty miles, just one mile wide and easily controlled by enemy aviation. In fact 67% of the naval losses will be caused by Anglo-American aviation ⁽¹⁷⁾.

"I was always amazed - Cunningham wrote - that the Italian sailors continue to sail their ship despite the great dangers that surrounded them. These ships were subject to attacks of surface, underwater and air for as long as the crossing from Sicily and their stubborn resistance should be mentioned by way of praise" ⁽¹⁸⁾.

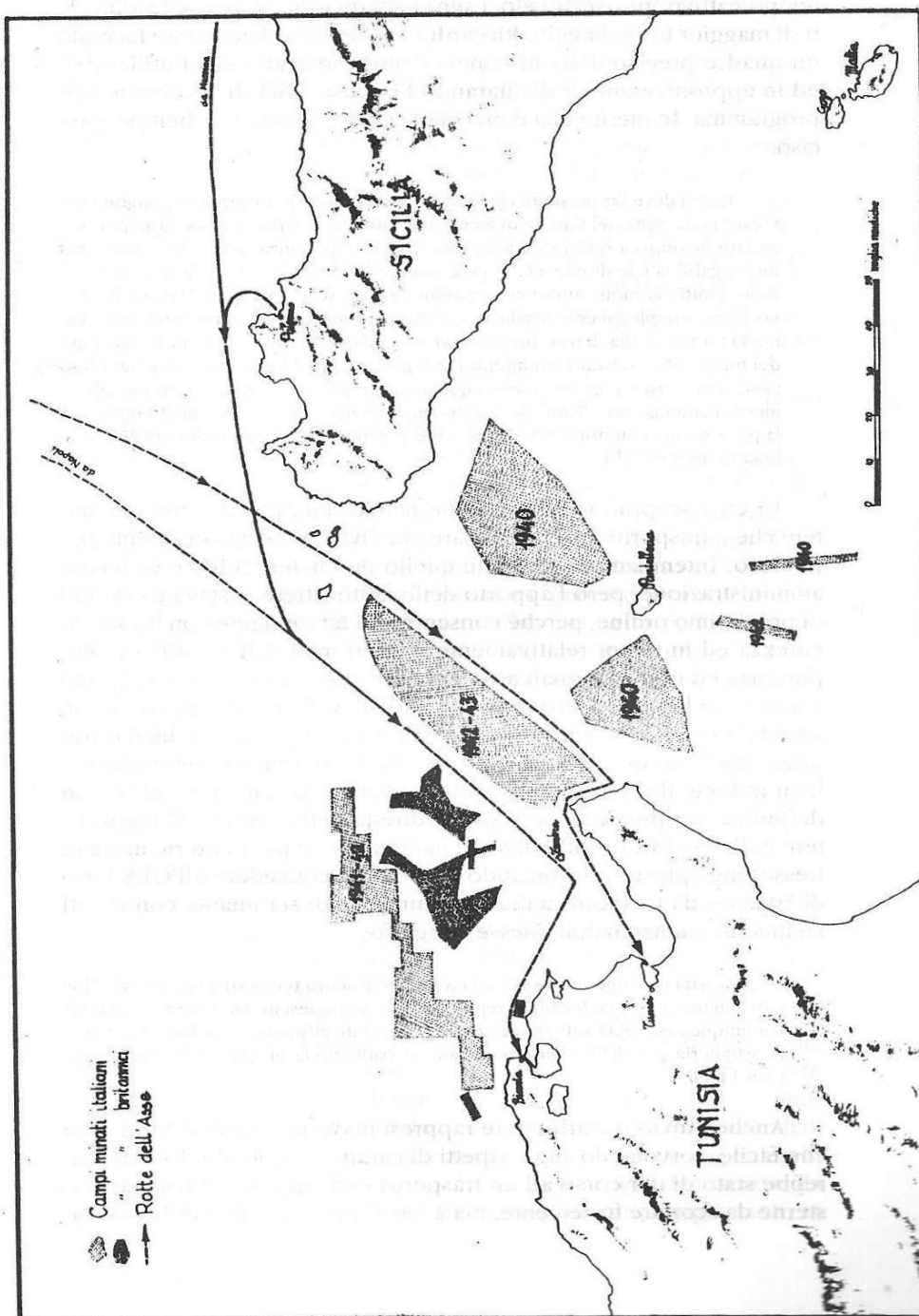
Needless to recall all the meetings to define a convenient defense of the convoys, especially against the underwater danger. In theory, to achieve satisfactory results needed seven ships of the convoy escort ahead, many more ships on each side as there were steamers. Similar solution could be accepted by the Command in Chief of the British Mediterranean but not the Supermarina: our chances did not allow more than two spare ships per convoy, in order to at least make it difficult to surfaced or submerged submarine to attack at a shortly distance ⁽¹⁹⁾.

Among other things the extermination suffered in merchant induced to use any means and now the bulk of the cargo ships was not able to overcome 7 to 8 knots, a speed that the prolonged stay in the sea and facilitated the action of the submarines which, even when submerged, they could move more or less at the speed of the convoy ⁽²⁰⁾.

The minefields placed in the channel of Sicily

Schizzo n. 90

I CAMPI MINATI POSTI NEL CANALE DI SICILIA



The worry of supply still Tunisia urged to seek a way out. Kesselring in February proposed sending, even in bad weather, fast ships without escort or with only a torpedo boats of greater tonnage. Riccardi replied immediately by an accurate picture of the fast motor ships and other ships and in preparation and declaring it impossible to accelerate this program. Regarding the advisability of accepting the bad weather, accurate:

"(...) It must be pointed out that minimum security conditions impose navigate in the area of the Strait of Sicily only with manageable time not to meet with almost certain loss. The whole experience made so far confirms that directive prohibits derogation (...). Today weather conditions in the Strait of Sicily bad. German torpedo boats & landing craft flotilla departing from Marsala on the 18th is completely lost; reported on the coast between Tunis and Bizerte least 50 drifting mines. Sending ships into that area, before you get the time to allow a minimum of supervision, would run in precious ships with valuable cargo and crews increasingly rare, an absolutely unacceptable risk. This has been widely exposed to the Joint Committee for the protection of traffic & mentioned to General Weninger, repeating a similar request " ⁽²¹⁾.

The crisis broke out in full at the end of March. Riccardi had to admit that the troop transport by sea had become too dangerous. Mind you, not that that material was business as usual, however, the contribution of the landing craft was proving to be of the highest order, because it allowed to come with good security and relatively narrow materials of primary importance and urgency, such as artillery and armored vehicles. Initially had been left available by the OBS, which translated into a significant advantage for the supply of German troops overseas, then the loss, which occurred in February, of a good 31 semoventi induced the Italian Comando Supremo to review the issue ⁽²²⁾ and, ultimately, to resume the direct management of the twenty Italian landing craft⁽²³⁾. The difficulties of the moment and the pressing demands of Kesselring led the Comando Supremo to grant to the OBS the use of 50 Italian transport planes for a couple of weeks, with effects that are easily imaginable. Messe telegraphed:

"Army can not be left entirely without transport in its favor. Not until about priorities between Italian or Germans units. It is necessary, however, that is ensured sufficient continuous current influx of weapons infantry & artillery pieces already requested indispensable reconstitution of the units combat effectiveness (...)" ⁽²⁴⁾.

Even sending fuel was not a easy problem, flying on the general aspects. The ideal would be to act upon a transport exclusively with tankers heavily escorted, but that goes against the unavailability

of such ships, the shortage of escort and other elements of a technical nature. Add the almost total lack of fuel in Tunisia, which at certain times forced to ship gasoline and fuel oil before loading of other items of already scheduled upsetting plans and predispositions.

A judgment on the organization of supplies from Italy in recent times is not easy because now the objective difficulties were such and so many as to make the enterprise desperate. Moreover, any consideration should be made on the basis of statistical data often incomplete and even contradictory. However, the maritime traffic with the Libyan ports from November 1942 to January 1943, including, saw losses in gross tonnage of approximately 10% in November, 42% in December and 46% in January. The one with Tunisia from November 1942 to May 1943, however, suffered losses in the order of 2.5% in November, 16% in December, 14% in January, 20% in February, 16% in March, 31% in April and 72% in May. Overall he arrived in Tunisia on average 71% of the material shipped from Italy that is 306,500 tons of about 433,169, also gave little significance as it includes trucks, armored vehicles and artillery. Greater appreciation of the amount of fuel landed in Libya and Tunisia in the battle of El Alamein of 24,000 tons net on 48,000 in Libya and 94,000 of about 133,000 in Tunisia ⁽²⁵⁾.

In particular, in Tunisia from 31 December 1942 to May, 1943 landed 157,000 men, 8,500 vehicles and at least 400 tanks and armored cars (estimated). You can not ignore the bitter accusations of Rommel about the insufficient aid received in the spring of 1942, when losses in merchant ships were limited to 12.5%. How little would be enough to get a tactical success, at least one, the greater! And, conversely, what would be useful in Sicily those reinforcements!

Obviously recriminations and accusations between Italian and German, albeit in a certain form, were far from uncommon in the many high-level talks. The Germans, from Kesselring, were naturally certain that all wrongs were on our side, and also that the inability not infrequently convincing a little disingenuous. "I had the impression - Kesselring later wrote - that the war was not taken seriously by many Italians, who do not hear enough of their responsibility towards the soldiers fighting on the front. Each measure was applied with hesitation, and where it would take the most effort by all, they used half-measures. I was convinced that it was insufficient use of the war potential" ⁽²⁶⁾. Who went beyond the measure was Goering during his visit to Rome in early March 1943. Cini*, Minister of Communications, reacted and did not hesitate to answer back vividly the Reichsmarshall listing punctiliously the broken promises by the Germans on the subject of war supplies. Not only that, but did not tolerate interruptions from his astonished partner, which, however, later,

* Vittorio Cini, Count of Monselice, 20 Feb 1885 - 18 Sept. 1977

separately, he declared to Dollmann: "*Here is a man!*"⁽²⁷⁾.

The same Cini, in a meeting held by Mussolini a few days later, rattled off a series of daunting figures. In close synthesis, for transport by sea remained just 600,000 tons of cargo ships of very low efficiency; Indeed, with few exceptions, were slower ships. In addition, the utilization factor was minimal due to lack of supply, the possibility of enemy attack, deficient port facilities, shortage of docks, warehouses, railway stations, low capacity loading and unloading of the workers, as well as irrational use caused by military needs, so sometimes it became necessary to also start the ships whose loading was incomplete. And after long exposure Cini concluded: "This situation can improve through a more rational use, but can not be substantially changed. It should look at it in its reality, it is necessary to adjust programs to possibilities; this is about who has the responsibility for the war". At that, the responsibility for the war thanked for "the clear and explicit exposure that only today, March 10, 1943, is represented in its full reality unlike the vague figures that until now had been given". The prosecution was clearly aimed at Cavallero.

After the meeting Mussolini comforted those present saying that hope for a reversal of the situation would have been a dream, but it was simply "*to float, to the last*". Moreover, according to a memo that jealously preserved, "in June, the highest July 1941, we would have had to stay without a drop of fuel. Time after which we should have asked for an armistice, vice versa, we continued to float. A penalty - continued the head of the war - providing today than 600,000 tons [of merchant shipping] with a loss of 100,000 a month in six months would be left with only the fishing boats. What is essential is therefore to protect the heritage that we have now, waiting to protect then what we will have, on the other hand no one can say that the losses will be 100,000 tons/month." For such an astonishing tirade Cini said that the current situation was already on the edge of possibility, but Mussolini did not fold, "We are in a very difficult situation in terms of tonnage. We must protect what we have and fill the gaps as much as possible: it is certain that we will have a deficit, it is going. If you arrive at 60,000 tons would, today March 10, very satisfied"⁽²⁸⁾.

Ambrosio turned to Kesselring. He wrote that now to overcome the Strait of Sicily you could not count on that landing craft and boats of small tonnage and Air Transport. Except the Italian air transport was down to a dramatic level for the heavy losses suffered recently (37 S.82 aircraft destroyed on 60 available) and the Italian landing craft were numerically insufficient. It was absolutely necessary that the available means of KT tonnage to be shared equally, and that aid in air transport

the Germans would increase from a fifth to a quarter ⁽²⁹⁾.

In late April, things got complicated even more, if possible. Both for bombing by enemy planes, and for difficulty unloading by the recipient bodies, the movement of trains on the southern and especially on that of Sicily had become very irregular and was getting progressively worse with threat of traffic jams and dangerous arrests. The forwarding of trains over Palermo, Trapani, had become impossible because of the serious damage caused to the stations of Palermo and the two railway bridges over the River Oreto, but mainly because of the destruction of the locomotive depot with workshops.

Much of the railway staff, terrified for their losses and discouraged by the lack of adequate shelter, would not show up to work and stop the movement had created a stock of more than a thousand freight cars between Messina and Palermo, in good proportion loaded with food for the civilian population of the provinces of Palermo, Trapani and Agrigento, which for over two months could not have pasta, rice and sugar. It was necessary, after all, have the movement of air traffic to Tunisia about airports in eastern Sicily ⁽³⁰⁾. But the days of the Army Group in Tunisia were numbered.

The third battle of the convoys ended after six months of hard struggle. The Royal Navy will lose 12 destroyers, 12 torpedo boats, a corvette, eighty smaller ships and 135 ships.

Let's see more closely the conditions of Italian troops in Tunisia and, in particular, those of the 1st Army. We repeat that a confrontation with the enemy does not even arise. As talk of sorts when not only our infantry division type AS 42 was a small thing in itself (its structure was determined by needs defensive tactics and practical limitations in each area), but none of our large units could never achieve full organic level? All without distinction divisions, Italian and German, they fought always as complex heterogeneous forces, mixing expert battalions, battalions of march or complements, units worn with units just landed.

There is certainly a difference between the return of Italian troops of the ACIT, who worked in the Libyan desert, and those of the 1st Army, which acted in the Tunisian hills. The first suffered the full weight of material inferiority can not be overcome. A competent observer expressed this view: "As for our Italian allies, do not agree with those who speak contemptuously of the Italian soldier, without pausing to consider the adverse conditions in which they fought. The armament of the Italian army was far short of modern requirements; tanks were too light and did not offer any reliance by mechanically. Much of the Italian guns had a range of no more than eight kilometers away, while the British batteries

ranged from 8 to 24 km. Italian broadcasts were absolutely unsuitable for motorized war and could not work on the move. The rations were insufficient, there were no field kitchens and experiencing serious differences between officers and soldiers. The training and the efficiency of the young officers were at a very low level and there was close contact between them and their men. The most senior commanders and officers of the General Staff were quite well prepared and showed good capacity. During the North African campaign, the Italian troops provided much evidence of fervor and courage (...), But as far as could be conducted going forward with great momentum, lacked the coolness and calm needed in critical situations”⁽³¹⁾.

But in Tunisia for the first time, albeit not immediately and not always, the Italian troops found themselves fighting in a natural broken arena, where the holds of the land could compensate for many deficiencies, where the tank finally found life difficult. It is true that the degree of preparation of the additions proved normally very limited, especially in regard to the armament department (machine guns, mortars and anti-tank cannons), but when there was a minimum of acceptability in the ratio of amplitude defense sector the enemy was not; look at the Mareth line and at Enfidaville, despite the dominance of Allied aircraft.

Regardless of the overwhelming superiority of the enemy, it seems the organization of aerial cooperation of the Axis in Tunisia left much to be desired. Although the long experience of the African theater of operations would allow, in theory at least, a satisfactory solution, that did not happen. Very laborious gestation derived from a single command on the theater of Tunisia; also gained prominence from the very outset by the Germans. The poverty of the instrument, then, was a major influence far from negligible.

Messe expressed the topic in negative terms: "The contribution made by aviation operations in Tunisia was totally inadequate from the start and went running out gradually until it becomes practically zero. To this negative it competed for a quantitative lack of equipment and the organization of the defective Air Force. This fact had wanted to retain autonomy from the Command of the Land Forces, with whom was on a level of collaboration instead of addition; as the cooperation was generally spontaneous and generous, but the result could not be what could be achieved with the other system.

For most of the two air forces, German and Italian, they worked well in autonomous regime, losing even overall performance. It added that, at least initially, the Italian commander, General of the Air Fleet, was to rank significantly above the German *Fliegerführer*, just promoted to major general, when in reality aviation was essentially handled by the Germans, because they had the greatest prevalence not only in number, but

also and above all in the complex organization on the ground (...). It is therefore natural that the Command of the Army Group were addressing each request for air action to the *Fliegerführer*, which then "granted" with the Italian commander for a aid in which, moreover was not essential.

"(...) He missed almost completely, with few exceptions, an effective aerial offensive strictly adhering to the land situation and an adequate defense by fighters. Shares of night bombing, which was carried out from bases in Sicily sometimes, by order of Aerial Commands located in Italy, on attractive army targets, were not even always reported to our command. It turns out, however, that such actions were usually carried out by a small number of aircraft, achieved the goal, undoubtedly unloaded their cargo of bombs, retreating immediately on the way back (...)" ⁽³²⁾.

Despite the factual situation is right to recognize the intense work of *Messe* and his principal deputies, Generals Orlando and Berardi, aiming to restore appearance and spirit to the Italian divisions at the end of the long and exhausting retreat. The results were frank satisfaction.

Detected with pleasure the good response of the units in general fire, explicitly noted, most admitted that even the enemy, will be useful to review the many deficiencies.

Still the structural problem: professional inadequacy and poor leadership abilities of too many reserve officers, often resulting from the insufficient degree of specific preparation, were the underlying flaws found also in Tunisia, without it being possible to remedy it in the wear. It is obvious that the person they felt humiliated by a situation for which they were not responsible, but it is also natural that ultimately suffered the most were the units. However, something was done, at least to fill the most glaring gaps in practices. Aggravating this situation of unease helped the comparison with German units, where the framework had a higher average yield, were masters of the craft appeared and trained exercise of the responsibilities through better selection and a top technical training, besides undeniably peculiar characteristics of the breed.

Even for Americans showed, right from the start, the problem of a training level of the soldiers of the 2nd Army Corps proved unsatisfactory, while taking sufficient account of the factors that could have an impact on the efficiency of the units in battle. They gained experience, they realized that the issue went beyond the 2nd Corps and faced with a rawness and a concrete specimens. Gen. Clark told that, having gone to the hospital in Oran finding Gen. McNair, came "from Washington on a visit to the Tunisian front and was wounded during an inspection, he found it extremely annoyed because "*American soldiers do not fight*" ⁽³³⁾. It was proposed, on his return

in the capital, where he oversaw the training of ground forces, to review strictly training the organization and discipline of fighting. The same Gen. Clark, who on Jan. 4, 1943 he assumed command of the newly-formed 5th Army in Morocco, fully agreed and spoke of similar measures taken by him about it: "I had been tough, as I know I will be, in punishment for their offenses in the territory and the 5th Army had repeatedly insisted that it acted with the utmost severity disciplinary viva vie both the officers and in respect of the troops, particularly in respect of the first, believing that the enlisted men had to be all too eager to learn the rules and disciplinary tactics imparted in the training camps, because in combat their lives would depend on the way as they would have learned their lesson" (34).

As for the real government of the personnel from the Italian side, it strongly left to be desired for inexplicable and inconceivable superficiality and insensitivity. Let's just two points.

With the return of Libya's territorial commands and organs of various elements also they returned to Italy for a short time to Africa, causing fiery comments from those who fought in the desert even for over eighteen months. Neither the Ministry of Guerraseppe bring attention to the subject, or the commands of Libya were able to intervene immediately to prevent lawlessness. Yet the issue of repatriation had long been one of the most distressing!

Another point. In the German army, since the early years of the war, the custom developed to promote the officer after a few months he had well controlled at the front of a unit level. In November 1942 Hitler imprinted a more pronounced emphasis on the measure, setting career advantages of various kinds for the officers (active duty or reserve) that have demonstrated clear attitude to the command and drove to victory on their units. Of course, benefits to be granted on the drum or almost. Not only that, but the officers and staff of the extraordinary value of proven ability, which gave custody of success in assignments involving command responsibility against the enemy, they had to be identified and promoted *"without regard to length of service or age,"* in the basis that *"a smooth ride of all is in contradiction with the principle of ability and command."* And the chief of the personnel office of the OKH explained the will to recognize the merit of the fighting officers: *"These officers are the closest to death and to the following should be given first chance to enjoy such progress."*

Such practice was described in a memo requested by Cavallero in January 1943. To cite a few examples of measures: officers from lieutenant to colonel, whenever, awarded a decoration or to the value mentioned in the War Bulletin, could receive, on a superiors proposal, the progress of a year of service;

more the function of the regimental commanders and colonels the function of the division commanders, after two months of actual command in operations, they were promoted to a rank and appointed commanders of the unit holders; commanding officers of the units of higher level to the degree they covered after six months or a year to the front line with no operating activities were promoted. Hitler also reserved the right to personally choose among the general superior to those divisional suitable to fill the highest positions of command.

Even the Italian army there similar provisions: the promotion and advancement by merit of war, transfer in permanent service for about war; but they were usually granted very cautiously and, however, required a long and complex bureaucratic process. Cavallero, who as mentioned had expressed interest in the subject, said: *"For us it would be a bit strong. We have certain laws and there are fears of going to the Senate and to hear the opposite view. Only yesterday I talked about the appointment of a general and they said the Finance [Ministry of Finance] may make trouble. With this concept ends and nothing is lost but time"*⁽³⁵⁾.

The reasons given by Cavallero not persuasive, because something very similar, in essence, was that we had during the First World War. Of course it would be essential to avoid an application or lightly-accurate German criteria. Or, while remaining within the laws in force, that the measures were at least timely. The prize, as punishment, must be ready.

Abstracting, however, the prize remained the absolute lack of recognition of the burden assigned to who was appointed commander of a unit holder while not covering the corresponding degree. While in the Anglo-Saxon armies existed the temporary promotion for those responsible for an assignment of a higher order, following the sound principle 'honor and duty', we have a great deal of lieutenants owners of a company and the many captains who hold a battalion, not only remained such but their greater responsibility was held in disregard. According to the law of progress of May 9, 1940, one of the formal requirements for the promotion consisted in having made a minimum specified period of command in the covered grade. Therefore it could happen, and it happened that a captain commanded a battalion as holder for ten months a series of fights, earning for his behavior two or three rewards to value Italian and German and finally the promotion by merit of war. Well, who returned from captivity as a captain and received grades higher for subsequent promotion to colonel had to fulfill, now in peacetime, the entire period of *at least* a battalion because that exercised so brilliantly in the war did *not matter* at the administrative level It is having been made captain! Next to a procedure

it is hard not to call petty, it existed then the grave injustice. Messe felt obliged to point out repeatedly the case of Brigadier Generals, commanders of a division in Libya and Tunisia, and for many months, bypassed in advancing chosen by fellows residing in Italy and covering a normal office of Brigadier, not of command.

It added that as of March 1943, the commander of the 1st Army and the commander of XXX Corps had not the power to grant rewards to the value "in the field", faculty -power of bureaucracy - in Libya had been recognized Bastico (after much persuasion).

Finally it is worth mentioning a humble but very significant detail: the very low concern for the regular supply of certain items of personal and current, such as buttons, thread, needles, razors, envelopes and writing paper, postcards, pencils, badges of rank for NCOs and graded, decorations and insignia, etc .. How surprising that the soldier felt neglected? Not for nothing Messe - who even remembered the Greek campaign and that of Russia -in his report spoke of "*miserable government personnel*."

And it has come to speak of relations with the Germans, as well as telling the comments of new players. "As anyone who has lived and fought for a long time with the Germans - Messe is still talking, but Sogno agreed in full - the harmony proceeded in descending order from the battle lines of the rear line, fading from one admirable camaraderie state of tension and sometimes of real hostility, the latter determined by incorrigible characteristics of Teutonic tactlessness, the boorishness, the arrogance. So it is that the reports of the command of the Army with allied elements take on a value substantially different proceeding from the front to the rear. "Nothing new. It seems, however, that in Tunisia relations at a high level were strongly influenced in a negative way by the person of the Chief of Staff the Army Group, depicted as "soaked in invincible contempt for all that was Italian, who suffers from a presumption of infallibility and so stubborn in decisions taken even against all evidence of error."

Italian inevitable resentment, the more vibrant the more glaring was the fact origin of conflict. We will limit ourselves to two incidents that aroused a particular surge of Messe.

In April von Arnim he had expressed some concern about possible of Allied landings on the back of the two armies. The enemy is not proved, indeed, special aggressiveness. He limited himself to a single weak episode with three light vessels entered the bay of Sidi Daoud, on the northern coast of the peninsula of Cape Bon, 28 April. The incident, however, was more than enough for a controversy, as the Army Group had not supported the incursion caused no reaction of the Italians and Germans elements in place, which

they had "*cleared the coastal area without any resistance*", and the arrival of the Italian mobile elements had occurred only after the withdrawal of the enemy vessels undisturbed. "Because, according to experiences of combat made - wrote von Arnim - the enemy was just brought to land, be obliged to communicate what it intends to do the 1st Army to prevent a landing, and also what measures were taken against the garrison that he left the harbor without a fight. Against the German group stationed there for the rescue of shipwrecked [?] It will proceed from the Command Army Group" ⁽³⁶⁾. The investigation conducted by Gen. Sogno he brought to light just the opposite, but it should be considered that the strength of the German conviction remained slightly tarnished ⁽³⁷⁾.

The second episode was harsher. The bulletin of the Army Group of April 30 stated:

"At the division von Manteuffel the enemy was able to break through our line of safety on Kef en Nsour and Kef Touro, without the two regiments of Bersaglieri used there - according news received to date - they had opposed considerable resistance" ⁽³⁸⁾.

The next bulletin issued by the Army Group on 19:00 of May 10, reported:

"The situation along the coast is not yet clear because of non-performance of the Bersaglieri regiments used there (...)" ⁽³⁹⁾.

It burned and General Mattioli rushed to the scene to speak with both the German commander of the sector, and with the two Italian commanders. He consequently had to ascertain that on April 26 the 5th Bersaglieri had only 500 men, divided into two small battalions (five companies in total), and the 10th had collected the residues in a 800 men battalion formation. Each regiment was holding, with a number of company sized key points, a front of more than seven kilometers in the ground covered by thick forest, where large infiltration British had good game given the large gaps existing between the static structures. Mattioli said the German commander that only his warnings could be the source of the information contained in the bulletin of the Army Group and he replied that "two of his officers (one connection with a battalion) had reported that some elements of our Bersaglieri had objected to the required resistance, but why did not intend to extend this appreciation to all of our units, "adding that he had indeed highly regarded the behavior of Bersaglieri just a few days before" ⁽⁴⁰⁾. Messe, who continued the investigation, spoke in vehement terms to von Arnim ⁽⁴¹⁾. But it was a question of mentality and system.

Marras also indicated by the Berlin subtle meaning of various OKW bulletins: in the areas of the front held by the Italian situation

it was restored in whole or in part exclusively by German troops. For example, according to the bulletin of 22 March: "... *in the south of Tunisia and in the central major British and American forces attacked the Italian positions*" That of the 23 stated: "... *in the south of Tunisia and in the middle are continuing fierce fighting. Counterattacks by German troops rejected in some places the enemy*" ⁽⁴²⁾.

So it is easy to imagine the German press comments about the fall of Tunisia. It came to explain to the public the rapid decline of a defense recklessly presented as capable of long duration; So while it was given wide prominence to the value of the German soldier who "had yielded only the overwhelming power of the Allies, the other appeared a few notes on the presence and on the resistance of the Italian troops, with some insinuation tending to attribute to them the main cause the sudden collapse" ⁽⁴³⁾.

The loss of the last strip of African land aroused among the Axis allies was very disconcerting. The Italian military attaché in Bulgaria reported the "*deep impression*" and "*the increased pessimism*" raised by the event in all environments, since the last Mussolini-Hitler meeting and the subsequent propaganda had led to the conviction of a win Anglo American "*very problematic*", at least in short time. But above all, "*now everyone's attention is directed on Italy, whose stamina the majority doubts*", believing very likely an enemy attempt to land in Sardinia "*who, succeeding, could have incalculable repercussions natured moral and material on Italian people.*" Moreover, even the attitude of soldiers and German civilians in Bulgaria for official purposes alarmed: they almost openly manifested their depression and their discouragement and formulated dark predictions about the outcome of the war ⁽⁴⁴⁾.

Berlin officially is silent, however, the *Volkischer Beobachter* was careful to explain that for Germany face par excellence was the east, where it was fighting for the existence of the Reich against the infernal energies of Bolshevism; that Africa had always been a secondary theater because it was not to be-and in fact it was not become-a second front; now that the Anglo-Americans, who were preparing to take action against the European continent, would have understood what it meant having to hold a beachhead overseas ⁽⁴⁵⁾.

Words. The reality was very distressing. In Italy it loomed the prospect of an invasion into the awareness of a total inadequacy in the sky, sea and land. The illusions had fallen to almost everyone. Industrial production proceeded in fits and starts and depended on shipments from Germany for certain raw materials, the morale was very low, the spirit of the troops discouraged and apathetic. There were labor strikes in March in Turin and Milan,

declared for economic reasons, in fact had political objectives and "the remarkable fact - wrote Senise, police chief -is that all participate in strikes, fascists and non fascists .." ⁽⁴⁶⁾. The same Farinacci wrote to Mussolini:

"(...) The party is absent and powerless. Now is the improbable. Everywhere, in trams, in cafes, cinemas, trains are critical, he inveighs -against the regime and denigrates no longer this or that hierarch but the Duce. And the serious thing is that no longer occurs. Even the police remain absent, as if their work was almost useless (...)" ⁽⁴⁷⁾.

And the militarily there was worse. Even von Rintelen had noticed: "*To the Italian armed forces the backbone had been broken. The army was dying*" ⁽⁴⁸⁾.

NOTE TO CHAPTER IX

- (1) Giorgio Rochat, *Lo sforzo bellico 1940-1943*, in contemporary Italy, in September 1985, n. 160.
- (2) See Sogno, *Op. cited above*, p. 217. Please note that July 7, 1942 Cavallero had ordered in Gen. Gandin the "transformation of requirement C 3 in to requirement C 4".
- (3) *Ibid*, p. 219.
- (4) Francis Rossi, *Come arrivammo all'armistizio*, Garzanti, Milan, 1946, p. 12. The weapons had been removed from Aosta Inf. Div, whose infantry was therefore a few weeks with no other weaponry that the rifle.
- (5) For the situation in Sicily, see Alberto Santoni, *The operations in Sicily and Calabria*, USSME, Rome 1983.
- (6) USSME, *Minutes cit.*, Vol. IV, p. 370.
- (7) E. von Rintelen, *op. cited above*, p. 183.
- (8) A. Kesselring, *op. cited above*, p. 165.
- (9) B. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers cit.*, Last chapter.
- (10) A. Cunningham, *op. cited above*, p. 387. As an example of efficiency and of American opportunity we can mention a sudden emergency that occurred in February 1943. The calculation of the needs to improve the regularity of supply and transportation made it necessary reinforcement of 5,400 trucks. Eisenhower spoke of the matter to Gen. Somervell, who arrived on a visit to Algiers. "He said - recounted Eisenhower -who could be loaded at US ports in three days, provided that the Ministry of the Navy could provide the escort. I sent the Adm. King request., then in Casablanca, and in a few hours I got from him how to answer a simple "yes." the trucks began to arrive in Africa after less than three weeks from the day they had made such a request "(D. Eisenhower, *op. cited above*, p. 194).
- (11) L. Koeltz, *op. cited above*, p. 386.
- (12) E. von Rintelen, *op. cited above*, p. 223.
- (13) Giuseppe Fioravanzo, *La difesa del traffico con l'Africa settentrionale*, vol. VIII, Rome, 1964, p. 149.
- (14) F.H. Hinsley, *op. cited above*, p. 494.
- (15) A. Cunningham, *op. cited above*, p. 378.
- (16) M.A. Bragadin, *op. cited above*, p. 242.
- (17) The British torpedo planes based in Malta were at night, using the *Wellington* equipped with ASV special equipment to find the goals already set by the daytime reconnaissance. The basic American bombers in Constantine sought to day objectives spotted earlier by the night patrol of the *Royal Air Force*.
- (18) A. Cunningham, *op. cited above*, p. 394.
- (19) G. Fioravanzo, *op. cited above*, p. 172.
- (20) *Ibid*, p. 173. The lower speed meant that rarely a trip from Palermo or Trapani was accomplished in less than twenty-four hours. In bad weather it was more.
- (21) G. Fioravanzo, *op. cited above*, p. 175.
- (22) All semoventi of 75/18 of the 559th/131st artillery of the *Centauro* had been loaded on the ship *XXI Aprile*, sank on February 17. About why a load so precious it had not been spread over more ships Ambrosio asked explanations. The Upper Transport Directorate illustrated the difficulties, misunderstandings, mishaps why the circumstances and the urgency of the expedition had been recommended to run a greater risk, and concluded: "If in fact the steamer *XXI Aprile* he could reach the port of destination, well noticeable would be the advantages that the arrival to the full and in a group efficiency, particularly mobile, would bring to the battlefield "(DSCS, f.1/3843/D date 02/03/1943 of the Direzione Superiore Trasporti).
- (23) At the end of March, the Direzione Superiore Trasporti used 22 Italian Landing craft against the availability of 60 landing craft, 21 speedboats of 5 tons. burden and 4 K. T. transport 500 tons. burden from OBS.
- (24) DS Commander 1st Army, tele 2819 / Serv. On 04/14/1943, at 10:05.
- (25) Elements taken from USSMM, Statistical data, Rome 1950. On the issue of losses is

however mention those due, at least in part, to organizational flaws. The March 31, 1943 (after three years of war) the Direzione Superiore Trasporti was inspired by a fire in Naples on board the *Costa Caterina*, containing fuel in drums and ammunition. The ship blew up to three hours after the fire, causing serious damage to port facilities, the village and other boats moored nearby. Apart from the opportunity to not board the same ship fuel and explosives, although there are clear operational requirements could suggest order to derogate from that elementary safety standard, the Direzione Superiore Trasporti took over for the neglect of not shifting from the docks steamers laden with explosives.

- (26) A. Kesselring, *op. cited* above, p. 98.
 - (27) E. Dollmann, *Roma nazista*, cit., P. 133.
 - (28) USSME, Minutes cit., Vol. IV, pp. 325-338. The minutes of course, is silent on the subject, but according to the Gen. F. Rossi, who attended the meeting, Cini, on the momentum of the bitter truth, he concluded that the serious situation required it to review, in the light of practical possibility, the Italian situation within the alliance with Germany. Mussolini immediately severed the explicit invitation with a "*That would be tantamount to break away from Germany and to finish separately the war, and this will never be*" (F. Rossi, option. Cited above, p. 84).
 - (29) DSCS, letter of 04/18/1943.
 - (30) DSCS, f.1 / 9442/D date 04/27/1943 of the Direzione Superiore Trasporti.
 - (31) Friedrich von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles*, Cassel, London 1955, pp. 178-179.
 - (32) G. Messe, report cit., Pp. 315-316.
 - (33) It seems useful to take the opportunity for a tune-up. A sentence like the one uttered by Gen. McNair could be resumed with indignation from certain sectors of public opinion, to condemn the immoral behavior of a leader ready to throw mud on the humble soldier in an attempt to hedge its ineptitude, etc. For anyone in the business, such critique lacks common sense.
- The offending sentence, in fact, it reads like this: the soldiers do not fight, then they are misguided; the officers did not know how to bring the fire the soldiers, so they are unprepared; when soldiers and officers are not trained to be charged to blame "the system." Very simple.
- Of course, mind you, an account is a service comment or not *coram populo**, and more is a real indictment in a bulletin. But it comes to form, not of substance.
- (34) M. Clark, *op. cited* above, p. 168.
 - (35) Cavallero *Diary*, date 01/16/1943.
 - (36) DSCS, f.1967/43 / Segr .Ris.Pers. dated 4/29/1943 of the OBS.
 - (37) In fact, the only Italian machine gun which they had come within reach of shooting the enemy light vehicles opened fire at once, while the Germans on the spot, as with five machine guns, had left. The reinforcements were new arrivals as soon as possible, compatibly with the distance to be overcome.
 - (38) DSCS, f.2471 / 4679 military mail. Date 05/01/1943 of the Army Group.
 - (39) DSCS, tele. Segr 6738. Date 05/01/1943 of the Army Group.
 - (40) DSCS, tele. 2056 dated 05/04/1943, 01:00 hours of Coletun.
 - (41) DS Commander 1st Army, f.3976/Op. date 05/05/1943 -Appendix n. 46.
 - (42) DSCS, f.690/Ord. date 24/03/1943 military attaché in Berlin.
 - (43) DSCS, f.798/S dated 05/18/1943 military attaché in Berlin - Appendix n. 47.
 - (44) DSCS, F.10/14 dated 05/23/1943 military attaché in Sofia, addressed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
 - (45) DSCS, f.1214/Ord. date 05/21/1943 military attaché in Berlin, Appendix. 48.
 - (46) Carmine Senise, *Quand'ero capo della polizia*, Ruffolo, Rome 1946, p. 171..
 - (47) F. Deakin, *op. cited* above, p. 222.
 - (48) E. von Rintelen, *op. cited* above, p. 187.

*[Latin](#), literally 'in the presence of the people'.

ATTACHED DOCUMENTS

MEETING BARBASETTI - ROMMEL
of 9 November 1942

DELEGATION OF THE COMANDO SUPREMO
IN NORTH AFRICA
RELEASE

INTERVIEW WITH THE GENERAL BARBASETTI WITH MARSHAL
ROMMEL AT FORT CAPUZZO ON 9 NOVEMBER 1942 (14:00 -15:30 HOURS)

Present are the General Mancinelli, Chief of the GS connection with the ACIT, Colonel Westphal, Chief of Staff the army, Colonel Piacentini, Deputy Chief of Staff of Deleaze.

Gen. Barbasetti. It shall present a copy of the message relayed by Deleaze and containing the provisions of the Duce about the defense line of Halfaya.

Mar. Rommel. He ensures that he had received it.

Gen. Barbasetti. On the line you are already deployed troops of the “Pistoia”; the “Giovani Fascisti” is running and can reach by the 11th. The IV Libyan Battalion, the Army had left Qattara Spring, it failed to reach Siwa and follows the division. This well will be back as the Army. On Halfaya now is the General Navarini with his command, with a Bersaglieri battalion and a group of artillery. They're also in flowing the few tanks remained to General De Stefanis.

Very painful sacrifice of X Corps, abandoned in the desert, despite the sending of the known 150 trucks required. Italian units, which are not motorized and have few vehicles, employ necessarily more time than the German to move; We must not move them away from the road too.

Mar. Rommel. And this perhaps a reprimand? The Fuhrer not received any word of disapproval.

The X Corps would have perhaps saved if the withdrawal had not been suspended for twenty-four hours following the order came from Rome to stand on the spot.

Gen. Barbasetti. I made a statement to commemorate a necessity of Italian troops in this battle behaved bravely and did everything humanly possible to undergoing many painful losses.

Mar. Rommel. I'm glad of the Italian units. Even the German ones have sacrificed; the number of prisoners is higher than that of Italian prisoners.

The enemy is now pressing along the coast. And 30 km. east

Sidi Barrani, opened the minefield and advances with strong groups and with small detachments along the railway.

I am in the rear: the remains of the German 90th, now to the east of Sidi Barrani, a recon bn on the railway; leaving the remaining German forces and the XX corps are retreating.

About Halfaya are the 3 battalions "Pistoia" and a mixed German battalion; the Hein KG is sent back to collect the missing.

Gen. Barbasetti. The "Pistoia" also has a battalion "Piceno" perfectly fine, armored units (an armored car company and a tank, a self-propelled battery) and also three groups of artillery, including one of 105/28 called in reinforcement.

You need to know the intentions of the command of the defense.

Mar. Rommel. Intention of the army was to hold the line of Halfaya and this was counting on the Division "Giovani Fascisti." Without it you can not do long endurance and it is important to fall into the hands of the enemy the least possible number of Italian and German soldiers.

Those not motorized falling, so it must be immediately collected in the forts of Tobruk and Bardia.

Gen. Barbasetti. The "Giovani Fascisti" immediately he started moving and were immediately sent to reinforce the few vehicles that had, could not have come before the 11th.

It is anticipated that the enemy is not able to proceed too quickly; so you will have time to better organize the defense.

It is also obviously indispensable one command, so that, referring to the intentions mentioned in your telegram yesterday to the Supreme Commander, I do not know how you could operate in double.

Mar. Rommel. I need to count on the possibility that the enemy is tomorrow night in front of Halfaya and I'll be lucky if I can make you withdraw the troops back again.

I have no means to control because links are missing. I have therefore proposed the necessity of your cooperation for the control of the Italian troops.

Gen. Barbasetti. Naturally maximum cooperation as always, but it is essential that the command is held by one person; it also shows that you have already felt the need to give direct commands even the commander of the Tobruk.

Mar. Rommel. Agree; the command will continue as in the past.

Gen. Barbasetti. The operating segment of Tobruk is under me, it is time to be in the scope of the ACIT it should be confirmed if the commander will receive direct orders from you.

Mar. Rommel. I will provide.

Gen. Barbasetti. To come here to Capuzzo I moved up the endless column of vehicles occupying all the way. They nearly all German, many of them carrying unnecessary things and many are also empty.

After the effort made and the losses are very few Italian trucks.

It must relentlessly unload as it is for the subsequent use and leave the vehicles for the troops.

It must comradely help with German trucks and return those Italians for a long time at the disposal of your Intendenza.

It should also be established where the huge mass of German vehicles must collect. For our part, while at Bardia already operates a logistics center in the Bardia-Gambut are gathering the few isolated and bewildered units that could fall back, as well as elements of XX Corp. which they were at the bases.

Of the Germans I think there are units of the three divisions.

Mar. Rommel. Not three divisions but three battalions with artillery; I collect all German forces corresponding to a division.

I intended to have for tomorrow night in Sidi Omar the Division "Giovani Fascisti" because it is not impossible that the enemy face a detour in his movement along the coast and attack the division on the march.

For German trucks I have commissioned a general. They now go over to Tobruk.

Gen. Barbasetti. If so it would be necessary to divert the "Giovani Fascisti" to Tobruk.

Mar. Rommel. The question is whether it is preferable to carry it here or Gialo.

Gen. Barbasetti. It also depends on the duration of the resistance expected on this line.

Mar. Rommel. Half a day because I can not wait for the enemy.

Gen. Barbasetti. So not only you can not resist on the border, but you lose it all because there is no time to withdraw.

Mar. Rommel. Must bring as much as possible to El Agheila.

Gen. Barbasetti. But these positions reinforcements arrive: a full battalion and truck convoy is now at Bardia, three more will flow.

Mar. Rommel. They are insufficient and will come later.

Gen. Barbasetti. We can not forget that the order is to stand here. We are two soldiers, then we might as well make a good end.

Mar. Rommel. We will try to keep the front of Halfaya as long as possible, but you can not operate without connections.

Gen. Barbasetti. We send immediately radio stations to the XX and XXI Corp. The "Pistoia" has its means of connection.

Mar. Rommel. We will try to motorize the German troops. It will be necessary to do the same for Italian troops.

Gen. Barbasetti. They absolutely lack vehicles, so it is essential to at least return to the XX the Italian truck group.

Mar. Rommel. You can not, you need to truck transport German units;

truck transport was one of the preconditions for our intervention in NA.

Gen. Barbasetti. This increases the already very serious difficulties in which we find ourselves for the "*Pistoia*".

Given that it has only a few suitable vehicles, everything should be done to facilitate its movement.

Mar. Rommel. The will have to operate astride the street.

It is then established:

- The garrison Siwa-Giarabub must fall back to Gialo El Agheila;
- no further deployment of non-motorized troops on the line of Halfaya;
- remove everything you can from Marsa el Brega, even mobile artillery and troops of Tobruk;
- remove to Italy, by air or by any other means, any other not motorized element. This is to decrease the number of prisoners.

MINUTES OF THE MEETING
HELD IN THE ROADHOUSE NEAR THE K.3 AIRFIELD OF BENGHAZI
13 November 1942
GENERAL GOVERNMENT OF LIBYA

*Comando Superiore
Armed Forces of Libya
General Staff*

P.M. 11 on Nov. 13, 1942

Today, November 13th, 1942, at 11:00 on the premises of the roadhouse predicted, we held a meeting, attended by:

- His Ecc. The Italian Marshal Count Ugo Cavallero, Chief of Staff General;
- His Ecc. Marshal Italian Ettore Bastico, Governor General and Commander Superior armed forces of Libya;
- His Ecc. Major General C. d'A. design. Army Count Curio Barbasetti Prun, Head of the Delegation of the Comando Superiore to NA;
- Segretario: Division General Emilio Giglioli, Chief of Staff Comando Superiore of the armed forces of Libya [1].

1st - General Barbasetti reports on the situation of the ACIT, which is the communications received. The complex the situation, General Barbasetti indicated only briefly, the annexed is attached.

- 2nd The defendants expressed the unanimous opinion that the only line to offer a stop enemy attack is at Marsa el Brega -Agheila -Marada; they believe that the line of Misurata does not offer a serious possibility of resistance, and it is also too close to Tripoli.

Then all agree on the need for stopping the enemy on the aforementioned line and to inject as soon as possible to the west of it, all the materials that it is still possible to drain, over those who have been evicted, with commendable energy, by of Delease.

-3rd For the defense line of Marsa el Brega -Agheila -Marada be counted on units flowed into, or being busy, from behind, and especially the air-transportable Infantry Division "La

[1] The meeting was also attended by Admiral Giartosio and General Bernasconi.

Spezia" and the Armored Division "*Centauro*". It seems you can also count on Infantry Division "*Giovani Fascisti*", that is withdrawing, by truck, from Giarabub-Gialo on Infantry Division "*Pistoia*" and other battalions and units coming from the rear of the armored army (ACIT).

4th - A brief occupation advanced to the position of Marsa el Brega -Agheila -Marada is given by the area of Ajdabiya, which is being implemented in a small array of coverage (three infantry battalions, a- dozen tanks, some armored cars Some batteries).

5th - It is expected that the meager of the ACIT units, which are in retreat, will flow into the Sirte - Misurata area, for their reorganization and the possible completion, subject to arrivals from the motherland.

It remains to be determined that the General Barbasetti continue reordering, already begun, of the units, services and materials being discharged.

Establish, in accordance with Superlibia, places of gathering. For the German part has been indicated, which collecting zone, that of Nofilia.

6th - As for the artilleryman, it is believed that the defense of the line requires the deployment of some thirty groups, of which at least one third of medium caliber.

At present we have at the Division "*La Spezia*" 7 groups, a total lack of power (from 3 of 65/17 with two batteries, 1 of 77/28, 2 of 75/27, 1 of 105/28 with two batteries). The "*Centauro*" has a group of 90 with two batteries, the Division "*Giovani Fascisti*" 2 groups of 75/27, 1 of 65/17, 1 of 100/17. Two groups can be collected from Gialo and Ajdabiya. Total 14 groups.

The rest should be filled with the artillery that flow from the east. You do not know how much the Army artillery will fall back; an indication in this regard you can only have in the coming days.

7th - To strengthen the air defense of Tripolitania you believe you can provide with the materials cleared from Marsa Matruh to Tobruk and Benghazi, while the German will be made available to the anti-aircraft artillery that had recovered.

8th - The Air Force moved in the fields of the area between Benghazi and Tripoli. It is presently deployed between Martuba and Nofilia; in the coming days gradually to the west of Agheila west of the line, up to Tripoli.

Aviation losses were not sensitive.

The commander of the 5th Air Fleet, His Ecc. Gen. Bernasconi, attending the interview, feels however that a significant reinforcement

in order to give effective support to the troops deployed on the Marsa el-Brega Argheila-Marada line and to protect areas of concentration of troops and means (it will be ordered maximum scattering).

9th - Nothing in particular stands out for the Navy, being technical problem Supermarina will examine.

10th - The defendants consider that, with the measures set out above, can be opposed first stop the advance of the opponent will be, probably, slowed by the difficulties of the organization of the movement of supplies and the ravages of mechanized and armored.

It is essential, however, that new media, primarily tanks and artillery of Germanic types, are made to flow quickly from Italy, along with anti-tank weapons, ammunition, fuel (also, of course, aviation), spare parts and other supplies.

Marshal of Italy
Chief of G.S. General
UGO CAVALLERO

Marshal of Italy
Governor General
and Commander Sup.
Armed Forces. Libya
Ettore BASTICO

Excellence Gen. Barbasetti, head of the Delegation of the Comando Supremo in N.A., has agreed with this report in all its parts.

Major General Chief of G.S. Comando Superiore of the Armed Forces Libya
Secretary EMILIO GIGLIOLI

Attached to the minutes of the meeting
of November 13, 1942

GENERAL GOVERNMENT OF LIBYA
Comando Superiore
Armed Forces of Libya
General Staff

Command X Corp. with divisions "Brescia", "Pavia" and "Folgore": lost.

XXI Corp. divisions "Trento" and "Bologna": lost.

XX Corp. with divisions "Ariete", "Trieste" and "Littorio": reduced to a battle group with two co. Bers., nuclei autobl. "Monferrato", 8 field guns. Some A/T guns

"Pistoia": retreating from Halfaya, with 350 infantry, I/36th Infantry and 1 group 75/27, the first group and from 100/17 to 105/28 one group of two batteries.

"*Giovani Fascisti*": retreating from Gialo with his two infantry battalions and four groups, the IV Libyan Battalion and IX A.S. Battalion. Giarabub.

Units engineers of the Army: retreating almost all, while those divisions were involved with the other elements of the G.U.s.

One part (the most valuable) plants of the Superintendency is under evacuation.

Deposits of material depots of Tobruk and Benghazi, as far as possible, have been cleared.

From Tobruk and Benghazi they have been or will be sent back whole organic anti-aircraft and field batteries.

Our Air Force is falling back on the fields of areas between Benghazi and Tripoli.

They are in charge of the order of immediate rear areas is Major General Sozzani and Brigadier Generals - Costa, Roveda, Paoletti.

COMMUNICATION FROM MARSHAL ROMMEL
of November 17, 1942

Command ACIT November 17, 1942
to the Comando Supremo -Rome
Nr. Prot. 141/42 11300 Segr.

I summarize below my previous communications on the conditions and the fighting strength of the Italian-German Armored Army units.

German and Italian troops have maintained the position of Alamein, from 23 Oct. to 4 Nov, holding all forces. The day 4 Nov. the enemy succeeded, by virtue his great superiority of heavy tanks, heavy A/T cannons, heavy artillery and ammunition, as well as several units of heavy bombers, to break through the 5 point position on wide front. The main penetration took place in the north of about 20 km wide, as at that point have been gathered the Italian and German troops still available. All troops have suffered heavy losses in fierce fighting these uninterrupted. They were shattered piece by piece by the enormous material superiority of the enemy on the ground and in the air. After the breakthrough enemy, only part of the army were able to reach the fighting position of Fuka, unable, however, to set up and maintain the new front. From day one, the enemy was able to break with fresh forces in positions in several points.

The losses have had so far in detail the following:

a) The X Corps Italian with the divisions "Brescia", "Pavia", "Folgore" was attacked by large armored forces during the retreat from the positions of Alamein to those of Fuka. It is well managed to reach fighting positions Fuka, but then fell after tenacious, brave defense almost completely in British captivity for deficiency of vehicles, fuel and water.

b) Of the Italian XXI Corps, the division "Trento" was strongly crippled in terms of Alamein and already lost the day 24 Oct. half of its forces. The division "Bologna" and the remains of the division "Trento", repeatedly cut to pierces by the enemy, suffered heavy losses. In the subsequent retreat to the positions of the Fuka corps it was almost completely destroyed. There remain only a battalion and a half and two artillery groups.

c) Of the XX Corps motorized divisions "Littorio" and "Trieste", used in defense against enemy attempts to break through in the north of the location of Alamein, they suffered serious

losses, while the armored division "Ariete", attacked in front, side and back, was destroyed after valiant defense. The Corps is now only a poor reinforced regiment without tanks.

d) The fighting strength of the German Africa Corps, employed with the 15th Armored Division from the beginning of October and with 21st Armored Division from the end of October, is currently only one of a reinforced regiment.

e) The 90th Light Division, thrown also very early in the fight, still has the combative strength of about one and a half battalion reinforced.

j) The 164th light infantry division had the strongest losses of all German troops. Of 9 battalions there are about 2, of 6 batteries about 2. To mobilize men, these remains were divided among the other three Germanic divisions. As soon as the situation allows, the division will be reorganized and reconstituted.

g) The Ramcke brigade has only half of the personnel and has lost almost all heavy weapons.

h) The 19th Flak Division has lost 50 heavy guns and 60 light, it has since been reconstituted with 24 heavy guns and 40 light.

i) Of the 17 Germanic batteries of the army will remain 8.

The fighting spirit of the troops is intact, as is demonstrated by the their good behavior during the retreat. Taking into account the division "*Giovani Fascisti*" and divisions "La Spezia" and "Pistoia" and the armored "Centaur", the total fighting force that remains involves only about a weak German division, three Italian divisions of infantry and one Italian armored division. In this regard it is to take account of less force and armament of the Italian divisions against Germanic.

For the enemy can attack between 2-3 weeks, in spite of its undoubtedly serious losses, the position of Marsa el Brega with two armored divisions and four motorized.

Supplies Situation.

It was not possible to have a plentiful supply of the army in fuel and ammunition. The Army has been forced to be so stingy with each blow. In spite of this, the current balances in Africa is very low, so that the troops will not have -after their deployment in the position of Marsa el Brega - that 0.3 to 0.5 unfoc. The shipping online stock still lying in Tripoli (1 unfoc) takes a long time and is made very difficult by the deficiency of vehicles and means of cabotage.

Outstanding amounts of fuel are now completely exhausted, so that the German troops are currently immobilized. The Army needs daily average of 400 tons. fuel. If that its fuel requirements are not regularly

satisfied, are put in doubt both the conduct of operations as supplies. The losses of vehicles due to enemy action and the excessive material effort are extraordinarily high. The troop has food for six days. Additional supplies of food are in Tripoli. To transport them to the troops need at least six days.

Given the diminished our strength and more than serious supply situation, the position of Marsa el Brega - that is mined only poorly and lacks natural protection of the sides - can be defended against an attack by enemy forces relevant only if:

- a) they arrive at the earliest anti-tank weapons, tanks and cannons with plenty of ammunition required by dispatch of the army (Op.) of 16/11;
- b) they are immediately improved radically situations ammunition and fuel. This is possible but only through the use immediately and without savings, largely, of ships and equipment;
- c) it is significantly reinforced our aviation.

A.C.I. T. Africa
ROMMEL COMMANDER

LETTER MAR. BASTICO TO MAR. CAVALLERO
of 16 November 1942

Area Op., Nov. 16, 1942

Dear Cavallero,

I have read from the radio which tells me that that Marshal Rommel still retain control of the ACIT and therefore my request for a general officer of high rank, which could be Roatta or Messe, can not be accepted.

As a good soldier I have always accepted without question the commands that were given to me repeatedly under increasing criticism as well for Spain after Guadalajara; so for the Aegean when the fate of that possession was judged the most precarious; so in Africa after the first retreat; and I always had the good fortune to lead a successful conclusion the tasks entrusted to me from time to time.

But also in Africa, when I took off the Command of the Armed Forces of North Africa, to narrow it down to that very small armed forces of Libya, and the objectives of Alexandria and Cairo they appeared just a short time.

Therefore, the measure, even if, as you said, dictated by consideration of a higher order, he could not grieve. And in fact I grieved to the point to ask, for the second time, repatriation (the first, as you recall, was when you begged to stop the dangerous race Rommel for Alexandria); He denied me; and I, as a good soldier, I thought not to insist, even assuming that my acquiescence could have ascribed myself, later, to blame.

Now, in an unprecedented serious and full of unexpected, I was again given command of all troops operating in Libya; and reinstatement of this, precisely because it takes place in circumstances exceptionally delicate, I could not be proud.

Except that when you announced to me verbally, I felt the need to expose my thoughts towards the Marshal Rommel, during the period when it was under me, not only had never obeyed, but had also kept in my concerns a disciplinary form not always correct; I had judged, and judge still, brave soldier but in the absence of many of the qualities necessary to a commander in chief; and now, through no fault of his own, he has lost no small part of which the ascendant staff which could also compensate for the lack of sympathy and affection aroused among our younger; and represent you, in consequence, the need to replace it with another commander more sympathetic, and especially more

I willing to obey higher orders.

In this connection it allude to that the possibility of a suitable replacement was not to be excluded, but that precisely for this was not the case of tense, at least for the moment, in a principled opposition. And I fully agreed.

But today, with the confirmation that the Marshal Rommel will retain control of the A.C.I.T., and that therefore I wished replacement is excluded, a duty of loyalty requires me to submit to your enlightened consideration the delicate situation of a commander who, apart from any judgment on the professional qualities of an subordinate, even at the highest able, he can not rely either on his obedience and even about his camaraderie and devoted collaboration. What of this apparent gravity, especially when the employee himself, by virtue of control granted to it, will be entrusted, in fact, the battle that there is every indication should not be long violent flare up again.

As a good soldier, which I believe, I am always ready to accept the orders given me, and explicate with all my best wishes, all possible energy, all my deepest passion: but because, in spite of all my good will, I might be in a situation all the more delicate, I thought to manifest with all objectivity my thoughts, so that they can be taken into account for any further decision.

With loving devotion, your

BASTICO

Auto typed.

INTERVIEW BASTICO -ROMMEL
of 22 November 1942
(Shorthand notes)

Field Marshal Rommel explains the current situation in the zone of Ajdabiya.

R. The position of Ajdabiya is held by a German battalion, one Italian, with little artillery. To the north a scout unit. To the south a light scout unit.

This morning, at approximately 08:00 the enemy attacked from the E and NE with about 40 tanks. You not yet know the outcome of the attack. Followed by a column of about 500 vehicles (outcome aerial reconnaissance). Other units are marching southward from Benghazi and are in contact with the armored cars of the 3rd Recon.

It should assume that the enemy is at the heart of suddenly increase westward.

German forces are deployed near Ajdabiya-Brega Marsa. That is: the 90th Light Division (strength of a battalion and a half) to the west of Ajdabiya; the D.A.K. (Strength of a reinforced regiment) in the hills 25 km west-southwest of Ajdabiya; further west XX Corps (a battalion strength and means, without tanks). In addition to the position of Marsa Brega a battalion of paratroopers of the Ramke group. The 3rd Recon unit now moves the protection zone Maaten Giofer.

These are the remnants of the forces of Alamein. More there. To my knowledge, they have not yet come to Africa reinforcement of German troops. There are also about 3,000 armed men of the only small arms, but without any antitank weapon. These are the remnants of non-motorized infantry divisions, who fought at Alamein, but that could not lead to the following anti-tank weapons.

The order of the Duce, approved by the Fuhrer, is to defend Tripoli on the positions of Marsa Brega-M. Giofer-Marada.

This is a very thin line, which can not be reinforced with troops arriving from ahead. The occupation of the line M. Giofer-Marada is not possible for lack of troops. The enemy then has the opportunity to break this thin line and around the south. For my part I foresee an attack along the roadway [of] Bir es Suera. All of the retreating are used as a mobile reserve, to be employed at the point where the attack will come. The artillery will line immediately in such positions as to be able to immediately give their support.

As ordered by the Duce will be performed, however, if the enemy were to attack with large forces, it will be the annihilation of the last remnants

the Army. Represent once again the difficulties of bringing back the Italian divisions (Spezia, Pistoia and *Giovani Fascisti*) that are not motorized.

We keep in mind that we are dealing with an Army much superior in weaponry, with unlimited availability of ammunition and with overwhelming air superiority.

Our Army at Alamein has fought heroically. I cite in particular the Ariete, but was crushed by the superiority adversary.

The battle was lost when it was lost the battle of the Mediterranean (Field Marshal refers the matter said by the Duce already in September). They're so failed us supplies in men and material.

I sent General De Stefanis in urgent mission by the Duce, to inform him of the situation of the army and eventually cause him to change his decision because I see clearly that if the enemy attacks with the decision in this area ends with annihilation. We are much weaker than we were at Alamein and we can not sustain such pressure nor mines, nor with accommodation strongholds. We have a long way to supplies from Tripoli, 800 km of road, easily attacked with aviation. (Remember that the enemy currently has the airfields of Benina, Magrum, Berca). Even during the recent retreat we have lost a huge amount of vehicles following the air strikes and that is why we had the difficulty of transporting troops and supplies. I do not think therefore that it is possible to supply this road so long.

Also our air force has played a very modest in recent operations, because of much less than half. He was not able to make a contribution of some importance to the troops on the ground. (Remember the fierce fighting, up to four times in 15'). We now have a period of relative quiet, given that aviation is still in the phase of displacement. Now with the landing fields dry the air offensive resume and make it even more difficult supplies.

Therefore I proposed to the Duce to fall back on line Buerat, to leave the enemy the long way "thirst" (the Sirtica) and see to buy time until reinforcements arrive. This of course does not happen from today to tomorrow. There is also the possibility that the enemy attacks from the south or from Marada, they may be cut supplies. This can be avoided only on the positions of Buerat.

The proportion of forces is such that we can not support a battle. If we accept it, also beating us as heroes, it is the annihilation. We can fight only to buy time, hoping that the reinforcements arrive. We remember that the larger is the way that the enemy must take, the greater its difficulties. Cyrenaica is a real springboard to beat the positions of Ajdabiya.

I do not know what the situation in Tunisia. It seems that part of the *Centauro* has been shunted into that sector.

B. Only 36 tanks.

R. Here we do not have tanks. And then can not compete with the Americans. The enemy has indeed also a superiority in munitions.

However everything will be done to execute the order of the Duce, but the outcome is very problematic. Here has a purpose even my craft.

B. How much time would be needed for this eventual withdrawal?

R. Depending on if we have many mines. Then also it depends on the pressure that will exercise the enemy. We can say 14 days or three weeks. From time to lengthen our lives, because there is then the battle.

B. You have to remember withdrawing that we lose fields of Sirtica.

R. They are bad.

B. Tripoli by goods from the east, west, and soon by the south.

So we can no longer even count on the port of Tripoli.

R. Even my proposal of course is not a solution. It is to extend our view. With what we have left can not be saved Tripoli (3 divisions and a regiment and a half). However, until you reach the other orders, it will be executed as provided by the Duce.

If he could set foot in Tunisia, then the problem of supplies would change in appearance. But it is always a question mark.

(Field Marshal asks news about the situation in Tunisia).

(The Exc. Bastico and Mr. General Giglioli brief description the activities of the Italian-German troops in Tunisia).

B. I, too, given the situation, I await orders. Exc. Cavallero has announced that he will be here soon. You are doing everything you can.

R. Exc. Cavallero announced his visit to the 26th current.

B. We will come first.

R. As soon as possible! It may be that following the visit of General De Stefanis accelerate his visit. I was grateful that I sent General De Stefanis. In the various reports and in the reports that are compiled, you can never give an exact idea of the whole. A report you can never understand how much is easy to put into words.

B. As comrade, I express the hope that the situation will improve. Troops that would account, what would arrive at Buerat?

R. We should make an effort so that they arrive whole. But if I start a fight here, then there comes nothing. If you do not accept battle, I hope to take away everything. Even the *Spezia*, which incidentally is already 100 km. behind the front.

G. I would like to draw attention to the following difficulties that presents the line of Buerat: could force a further withdrawal, which, by creating distrust, could lead to further losses of men and material. The resistance would also be difficult due to lack of defensive and for the lack of water.

R. Even now we do not have water.

B. It is now only to list the advantages and disadvantages!

R. Exc. Navarrini could validate my thesis, namely, that here you can not resist. The positions of Buerat have a few more weeks of time for the arrival of reinforcements. Not here!

G. But Tripoli would no longer be used!

B. Yesterday there were three raids.

R. I think the front of N.A. can not be held here. I would like to start on time, because after any battle in Marsa Brega is not done nothing. Much you could prevent with mines.

B. The mines there are not more. They should come from Italy.

A. Basically the difference is this: If the enemy attacks here definitely, in eight days, two days after it clears the way to Tripoli and nobody stops him more. Then within 14 days can be in Tripoli. Instead of retreat to Buerat, the battle is postponed at least 14 days!

B. So is lengthening the life!

R. More is not there!

B. I must put myself under orders own.

A. Perhaps his Etc. can also be expressed. Navarrini.

N. we do not have reserves. We will do our duty to the end. We have only the strongholds, which are only 2 or 3 km between them, defended by a very thin veil of barbed wire and mines. It undermined only area straddling the roadway. Few mines in front of the northern strongholds. The remaining strongholds have neither barbed wire or mines.

B. Of course the situation is not happy!

N. I do not think the attack on the Balbia predictable, but by reference and then just on the roadway.

As the tank situation is unknown. As the *Spezia* artillery 3 groups something to 65/17. On the grid north of the *Spezia* there are collections of artillery during the retreat. The *Giovani Fascisti* almost 4 groups (which are to be buried, and currently [are] assembled and then too visible). The *Pistoia* has a group for each battalion. A group of 90 mm. of the *Centauro* has the task of making the terrestrial shooting.

G. In the very short term (5-6 days) should reach 17 batteries and also 16 more tanks [another] 25 tanks. 20 you already have. The other tanks were started in Gabes. In addition there would be in Tripoli German tanks (10 + 25). We intend to send these tanks with landing craft until Buerat, to save time. And also coming a Bersaglieri regiment of the *Centauro*, but no anti-tank weapons.

B. The situation is very serious, but we must always hope. However I will make a report and say that a decision is urgent.

R. I remember that my proposal for Buerat earlier is order to withstand Marsa Brega! Currently I do everything to keep here, but this could compromise after the other possibility.

B. As good soldiers must obey the orders he has; responsibility is neither yours nor mine.

N. I do not see the opportunity to further reduce the front, because it is essential to keep in Biella (road for Marada). I could only recover a battalion, but we judge that we are light everywhere.

At hand would remain a battalion of the tank school on foot, a light tank company, which has withdrawn from Alamein (9 light tanks), a company with more than 20 tanks.

B. On another topic, would I please make arrangements for some order to the trucks that withdraw back on Tripoli.

R. Already done. But these are vehicles that carry supplies. Columns are isolated and trucks carrying ammunition. Much is due to the fact that several columns we have been destroyed and now need to be rebuilt. I have already taken steps to send back General Schnarrenberger. However we will also put the issue of isolated trucks. I will with the gendarmerie. Imagine that the divisions have had to send back everything and unload to carry ammunition.

B. Have you news of reinforcements of aviation?

R. Much I was promised, but I can tell you that now I miss the pure reconnaissance. I do not know what happens to the line over 100 km. One must also take into account the lack of fuel. Even the tactical use is therefore limited.

Will arrive the trucks for the *Spezia*?

B. We do our best and we glean everything is located. I will also try to form a column for *La Spezia*.

Another question: with a powerful reinforcement of aviation, would see the situation the same or different?

R. Here an increase would not help much; Buerat to much more, given the long journey that the enemy should do under the scope of aviation. It could go astray in that area; It would be linked to the road, as we now are we with our columns. It would therefore have the disadvantages that we now have.

November 22, 1942 -XXI

MINUTES OF THE MEETING
HELD IN THE FIELD OF AVIATION OF ARA DEI FILENI
on November 24, 1942

Comando Superiore of the Armed Forces of Libya
General Staff

PM 11, on Nov. 24, 1942

*Meeting held on November 24, 1942, at 11:00, in a tent of the Aeronautical
Command of the German airport of Ara dei Fileni.*

They were present:

for the Italian side:

- *Italian Marshal Cavallero, Chief of G.S. General,*
- *Italian Marshal Bastico, Governor General and Commander of the Armed Forces of Libya,*
- *S.E. General of the Air Force Bernasconi, the Commander 5th Air Force,*
- *Major General De Stefanis, Commander XX Army Corp,*
- *General of Division Giglioli, Chief of the G.S. of Superlibia,*
- *Brigadier General Mancinelli, Chief of the G.S. Italian connection to A.C.I.T.,*

for the German side:

- *Marshal Kesselring,*
- *Field Marshal Rommel, the commander A.C.I. T.,*
- *General of Army Corp von Rintelen,*
- *General of Aviation Schiedemann (*)*
- *Colonel Westphal, Chief of Staff of the A.C.I. T.*

Mar. Rommel: Declares that the battle of El Alamein was lost following an undisputed superiority in the opponent's air force, tanks, artillery. Three weeks before the 300 heavy aircraft bombarded daily the Italian and German troops. Heavy artillery pounding our positions for hours. New tanks with an armor thickness from 15 to 18 cm and armed with pieces of 90 and 105, have been able to initiate action at a great distance and destroy the weapons of defense and our armored vehicles. So they were destroyed gradually the troops of the defense in 12 days of hard battle at Alamein.

(*) sic: Seidemann

From the first hours the battle was proposed so hard, that the north division of the second line, the German 15th Armored Division and the "Littorio" had to be used to stop the leak occurred. Later also the division "Ariete" has been employed for the same purpose. He immediately had the impression that, despite our efforts, because of the heavy losses that we suffered, it would not be possible to reject the enemy from the battlefield that had moved into our positions.

On November 4, the enemy was able to break through in five points in the CTA and "Ariete". The Commander of the C.T.A. was immediately moved to the front line with his last reserves.

Broken through the front, the enemy suffered attempted to cut our communications with Fuka, what was prevented, bringing on the heights of Fuka the troops remaining. On these positions, there was another battle, but on the 9th current our front (90th Light division and other units) was again broken. All attacks were broadly supported by the action of enemy aviation. The remains of the army were able to cross the minefields of Marsa Matruh and allow troops and services retreat with two days of rest. Some units already surrounded fought valiantly and managed to reach our positions. Among them the 21st Armored Division.

While the remains of the armored divisions protected the long columns retreating westward, an armored brigade has carried on the heights west of Marsa Matruh to protect the retreat.

Of course all this influx of convoys on the road could not retreat neatly. On the other hand, the road was the only way, because those who went astray in short were overwhelmed. I took all the men possible to retain the enemy, who again attempted to cut the road between Marsa Matruh and Halfaya. It was very difficult to protect the columns in transit of the pass of Halfaya, running off towards Sollum. The 90th Light division and C.T.A. They have always alternated in the rear. The XX Corps was moved to the south, for the protection of the roadway line from Barrani forward.

All this movement succeeded, despite the raging air strikes, has however created a situation which did not allow a resistance to the Halfaya passage. In fact, just the 90th Light had taken hold there, the enemy immediately attempted to circumvent the south. They have been lost groups of heavy artillery and units of the "Pistoia". It was therefore not possible to extend the front of Halfaya to the south with the division "Giovani Fascisti," that he would not arrive in time, so it was necessary to make the withdraw to Giarabub-Gialo-Ajdabiya.

It could not maintain the line of Tobruk, because they were not available a few non-motorized troops. Even clearing Tobruk was left in the rearguard of the 90th Light with the CTA and with the

the XX Corps, who have withdrawn under pressure enemy on the line of Ajdabiya. The maneuver more difficult was the retreat from Cyrenaica, because it was feared that the enemy would cut the road to Ajdabiya, or you could send troops to prevent this, for deficiency of fuel, that arrived by air, which prevented it from giving a enough to escort troops were to be sent into the wilderness.

The activity of enemy aviation in those days was very intense, is the fourth day and night, and many vehicles and tanks were destroyed. But many have been evicted from Benghazi and the enemy advance was delayed, blasting the serpentine of the Balbia. Bad weather prevented the enemy from advancing from Mechili-Zt. Msus of Ajdabiya. It was thus possible fall back on Ajdabiya, without being unduly disturbed; Ajdabiya rearguard Menton was heavily engaged by the enemy and suffered heavy losses. To find that the enemy has always had access to large quantities of ammunition.

Meanwhile Marshal Bastico had constructed the front of Marsa Brega-M. Giofer-Agheila with divisions "La Spezia" and "Pistoia". The front, along 160 km., extending to Marada. The division "Giovani Fascisti ", arrived safely from Siwa, had been between the divisions "La Spezia" and Pistoia".

The rearguard, who yesterday were 23rd and now 24th in Ajdabiya, were taken to the wrong side of our line, where they also withdrew the remains of the 90th Light Division (a battalion and a half, with 30 anti-tank weapons). The C.T.A. currently it has 35 tanks, 12 antitank guns, 14 pieces of artillery. The XX Corps with 10 armored cars, 15 pieces and 1 antitank gun. No longer has any tanks.

With the forces currently available, the line Marsa Brega -Marada can only be occupied in the northern sector. It consists in strongholds. There are mine fields and fences built last year. Among stronghold to stronghold and there are often intervals of 3-4 km. 30,000 mines have been placed. It is noted that at Alamein we had put 500,000 Behind the front were deployed mobile forces and recon units, so we can give support, in the event of an enemy attack astride the Balbia.

Behind the Agheila line there are numerous German soldiers without tank weapons and without machine guns (remains of the 164th Div.), About 3,000 men and several soldiers of the Italian Army Corps.

The number of trucks and vehicles, which were affected by enemy aviation, they had to be left in place.

The enemy has followed our retreat with units of the 7th Armored Division through the desert south-geblico and with? New Zealand Division along the Balbia, of which it seems that the enemy has put back in place the interruptions, because yesterday is marching southward from Benghazi.

It is to believe that the enemy attacks first with these two divisions, you hope to stop it, but the battle will be very tough, because the enemy, at the time of the attack, will again be supported by aviation and certainly will have a lot of ammunition. Keep in mind that some of the troops deployed at Agheila are new to battle, and certainly at the beginning will be impressed by the effectiveness of enemy fire. On the line you have sixty batteries, but almost all small caliber. There is a shortage of ammunition. For now it has only a third of a day of fire. As of Dec. availability will be half-day of fire. Also to keep in mind the degree of fatigue of the troops that have withdrawn from Alamein.

Between 2-3 weeks, the enemy will send to attack 2 armored divisions, 4 motorized divisions, namely: 420 tanks, 300 armored vehicles, 360 light guns, 48 heavy guns, 50 heavy anti-tank. At the same time our reinforcements can not arrive. It is also believed that the enemy will not attack only the front, but also with circumventing maneuver from the south, in an area of 50 km., That can not be watched for lack of forces. The garrison of Marada is very limited. The enemy then has the option of cutting off the remains of the army and to annihilate them. Requests for additions to the troops, weapons and materials have been made, but who knows when it will come, especially if they come from Tunis, which is the longest road. Come too late.

The Army took everything to keep the front of Marsa Brega-Marada, but his forces are limited and you can not do anything, if you accidentally basis for the position. On the rear are almost unarmed troops.

If the battle will be waged on the above line, it will not be possible to organize any other defense to Tripoli. Orders had the Duce were to defend this position and it will be defended.

It also notes that there is a shortage of fuel. Currently there is 80 tones per day, while it would take 400.

Mar. Kess .: expresses the opinion that, if you leave the front of Agheila, the Tunisian front will be threatened, especially if the port of Tripoli does not work well. Positions of Buerat not sufficiently defend the ports of Tripoli, Tunis and Bizerte. We must therefore resist at Agheila.

Mar. Rom .: He claims to have presented this to the Fuhrer that if the forces that attack should be higher than the 7th Armored Division and the 2nd New Zealand, you can not resist. And already difficult now disengage from the enemy.

Mar. Kess .: Declares that in Tunisia we are still not strong enough

to defend the beachhead. If you lose Tunisia it is the end of the African theater. It is therefore necessary that the Mar. Rommel fight as far away from the front of Tunisia. Troops that have withdrawn from Alamein fought valiantly and inflicted losses on the enemy, would be the first time that a vintage opponent after a journey of over 1300 km, he still had the strength to break through a new front.

No word yet on when the enemy armored and motorized divisions can be effectively used. The X Corps aviation of Crete inflicted and still inflict serious losses on the enemy. If some time has been decided to hold the positions of Agheila at all costs, we must keep them at all costs. But reinforcements are needed to African aviation fighters and bombers. It is necessary that the 87 guns arrive as soon as possible. It should assist the flow of fuel for transport. You need to have ports of Tripoli and Tunisia, because only then can get reinforcements and give the necessary means to Rommel. Many means may be aviation-transported, if you were transported fuel by air.

Mar. Rom .: insists in declaring that you can not stay on the noted line, because the troops lack the means, ammunition and fuel. Move to Buerat is to prolong the life of the ACIT. He believes, however, that now, Ajdabiya cleared, it is hard to escape, especially since no fuel needed for transport.

Etc. Beffi .: He pointed out that, on the withdraw on the Buerat line remain only 4 or 5 fields for all the Italian and German air force, which would be totally inadequate.

Mar. Cav .: He pointed out that it shows the average discharge of the port of Tripoli at 2000 tons. Superlibia will do everything to strengthen the unloading, using troops and local workers, as there is possibility to the send from Italy port workers. Asks Etc. Bastico to unify the efforts aimed at improving the chances of a prompt discharge in Tripoli. He highlights that, if you were to fall back on Buerat, the port of Tripoli would serve very little.

Etc. Bast .: Declares that everything possible will be done. However, it is necessary to strengthen the air defense of the port of Tripoli.

Mar. Kess .: promises that will be sent batteries and radar..

Mar. Cav .: You need to set up two truck units for maneuvering, one Italian, the other German, each of at least 200 vehicles.

Mar. Bastico delivery to Mar. Cavallero a note, in which

indicating the conditions needed to make a possible withdrawal to Buerat. They are the following: that the Germans must give us at least 500 vehicles which, if we want to bring back the division, "La Spezia" and artillery. These vehicles must be given to our Intendenza. It is necessary to have a strong aviation in Livia in order to protect the eventual withdrawal. You must have your back safe in Tunisia. If these circumstances were to occur, it would be an illusion to talk about a withdrawal to Buerat. Therefore it requires defend to the bitter end on the line Agheila-Marada.

LETTER FROM MAR. BASTICO TO MAR. CAVALLERO
of November 28, 1942

COMANDO SUPERIORE
ARMED FORCES NORTH AFRICA
General Staff

Op Zona. November 28, 1942

Dear Cavallero,

in my radio today, with whom I communicated the sudden departure of Marshal Rommel to Berlin, I added, "*I refrain from any comment*," but my opinion that you yourself have to agree with me that the thing go completely unnoticed, would for my part, as regardless of the way from the dignity of his rank and the position he holds.

Marshal Rommel knows to be under me; his gesture is therefore an act of indiscipline and open to full disavowal of my authority as Comandante Superiore and Governor General.

Made by any Italian general he would lead them to the Court of War, for abandonment of place in front of the enemy. But since Marshal Rommel does not belong to our Army, and since militate in his favor obvious political considerations, I fully understand how it would be futile to ask any sanction against him; but that will confirm - once again - yet persuasion to be the arbiter of every act and power to deny his talent the authority and orders of the Italian command.

What might be the consequences of such a state of affairs is easy to understand: but I also common ground that, in turn, can not take responsibility for execution of orders, who has proven to matter they both openly, both in pretext of situations that require immediate decisions.

However, confirming what I stated in my previous letter of the 16th current, utter to you, again, my deepest request to take into consideration the delicate position in *which I am and where I can stay no longer*.

As a soldier, I repeat, I know of only one duty: obedience to superior orders; but also obedience do not think it means surrender to the prestige and authority of command.

Sorry to have to increase the many serious concerns that weigh on you, I am pleased to confirm you the assurance of my devotion.

Bastico

Appendix no. 8

SUPPLIES FOR TRIPOLITANIA

Supermarina

on Nov. 29, 1942

Topic: Supply of Tripoli.

Memorandum No. 122

1. - The port of Tripoli is now full of ships under load; Last night there were 8,000 tons of land for which it will take another 3 or 4 days.

It is scheduled for December 3 the arrival of a new convoy of two big steamers with 900 tons of cargo and, in the following days, one of a series of small ships with fuel and ammunition for about 15,000 tons.

The fact is that, even as they start operations in the Anglo-American F.N.A., a major operation was underway to supply Libya, directed half in Cyrenaica and half in Tripoli. They came on November 9 at the port of Tripoli, almost simultaneously, taking advantage of the favorable moment, 8 ships with 17,759 tons of equipment, 78 tanks, 420 trucks and November 9 to 29 another 5 arrived, bringing the total of supplies arrived in this period - 32,371 tons, 132 tanks, 620 vehicles, and have lost 5 ships with 12,500 tons cargo.

The large amount of material arrived took a long time to be absorbed, since the port of Tripoli, in part to our initiative and in part to insistent demands of the allied Command, had been depleted, last summer, the majority of its resources port to endow the ports and anchorages of Cyrenaica and Egypt.

It should be noted that our resources in terms of port media (tugs, barges, pontoons, etc.) At the beginning of the war were very limited. No comparison possible with the resources of even a single large Nordic port type Hamburg. The occupation of Dalmatia and that of Greece, the losses in the two retreats Cyrenaica of 1940 and 1941 have further reduced. No help could be obtained in this field even from France won, which has not even given a tug.

Tripoli, after several months of forced activity, found itself facing a huge job that had to play with few resources, while the poor air defense could not prevent the continuous raids day and night.

Nevertheless, November 9 to 28 were landed 33,312

tons. with the daily average of 1,753 tons., that result must be regarded as the best obtainable.

2. -Now that Malta was stocked and that airports of Cyrenaica are in the hands of the enemy, the air strikes on Tripoli are such as to prevent the operation of the port. In the last few days have been severely damaged two of the three fast ferries unloading and a destroyer escort. Today at noon a raid of eight four-engine hit and burned three ships and a few tugs.

In the coming days the attacks will multiply and lead to new losses of ships and a reduction in the rate of discharge.

3. - Actually forces of the Navy together are not sufficient to protect the traffic to Tunis and Tripoli that.

The light forces of the Italian fleet were subjected to in two and a half years to a system of effort beyond any possibility of resistance of the material and personnel. The ships lost, both in the escort service and in the direct transport of materials, were many: 53 of 128 which we possessed at the beginning of the war; while came into service 19. The ships that need work and repairs are becoming absolutely imperative requirement is every day more numerous: now total 39 on 94 existing. Establishments are no longer in working condition to provide for the prompt repair of many ships together.

At this attrition we were subjected not only drives by their nature intended to serve the convoys (alerts escort) but also all the torpedo boats that were designed to supervisory actions and offense in the Strait of Sicily and elsewhere, as well as the great destroyer of the fleet, size and armament unsuitable to escort convoys and, moreover, now so reduced in number (only 19 of the modern type and 7 of antiquated), often to force the naval forces to immobility, as was the case last supply convoy of Malta, when only 4 DD. present in the Ionian Sea were employed in escort service or for direct transport of petrol.

The current situation of the ships that you can use as escorts permanently (antiquated destroyers, torpedo boats old and new, corvettes) is as follows:

ready ships: 36;

ships in for repair: 32.

With 36 ships, also constantly putting out to tender the DD Squads, also relinquishing any possibility of systematic submarine hunting, there is the opportunity to ensure adequate protection to trade in place, namely: supplies for Tunisia, Tripolitania, Corsica, Greece, Dalmatia, of Albania, Aegean traffic, traffic of oil tankers, supplies

from Sardinia to the mainland.

Keep in mind that a naval escort to adapt to today's aerial offenses should be very large: the last British convoy arrived in Malta protected 4 cargo ships with three cruisers and 18 between DD. and escort ships.

Our ships instead challenge every day the enemy having at best two escort ships each and often less; many go unescorted. But no effort, no risk has never seemed excessive, and despite heavy losses departures are always continued without interruption.

4. - The problem is aggravated by the fact that the brand new fast cargo ships are almost all gone; do not advance that 5 of the 31 who possessed valid. They are also disappearing steamers medium speed (10 knots) and should be changed to those of 8 and even 7, which doubles the burden of escorts because doubles the duration of the trip.

5. - To appreciate the effort of the last few weeks it should be noted that all our means were deployed in early November to the east to protect the best possible the contrasted traffic with Cyrenaica. Moving to the west was also very laborious because you had to transfer many steamers loads and discharges from different ports.

6. - The light ships have had to at this time, as at other times, also to provide the essential form of the defense of traffic that are the mine barriers. It was thanks to the full barrier of the Sicilian Channel, so painstakingly executed, what is today perhaps the greatest constraint to the operational capabilities of the enemy in all the seas, and that is the end, for him, the Mediterranean road.

The completion and renovation of this barrage require the use of several smaller ships that are always to be taken from the same.

7. - The problem is complicated by the deficiency of fuel oil and the difficulty of it flow into all the ports from which it is necessary that the traffic starts. So the lack of oil in Tripoli, following the sinking of the ships that were carrying it, has delayed many movements.

On this occasion it is necessary to point out that if the program will not increase the current supply of oil for the month of December is estimated that in three weeks we will have to suspend all transport. As it is known, at the moment most of the battleships and cruisers in the fleet are empty or half-empty. So the lack of fuel and the lack of escort, the one and the other due to the consumption

for the supply of Libya, we took every opportunity at the right time to throw against the enemy naval forces operating in French North Africa the weight of our Fleet combat weight that could have had a decisive part.

8. - In the predictions about the possibilities of traffic it is essential to keep in mind that in the winter months the percentage of days in which they are hampered by the bad weather is very high, especially in the area of the Strait of Sicily.

Having had to force the stormy sea of the past week has put temporarily out of service not less than 7 ships.

9. - The presence in Malta of a strong fighter air force, who had already proved to be very dangerous with the strafing of escort ships has in recent days presented a new aspect: to make it impossible to supply the anti-submarine convoys in the area of 150 nm. around Malta. In a week have been lost in this way 7 seaplanes aviation for the Navy and 7 of aircraft of the Armata (*).

10. - From all these circumstances arises the extreme difficulty of continuing traffic with Tripoli otherwise than by smaller ships for direct coastal routes unescorted. It also confirmed the impossibility of simultaneously supplying Tripoli and Tunisia.

This appreciation is fully shared by Admiral Commander of the German Navy in Italy. It has also been recognized in the Joint Committee for the organization and security of traffic, the Committee in which representatives of the German Navy and Germanic Air Force, like those of Supermarina and Superaereo, they way every day to deepen in every particular possibilities, the difficulties, the present and future prospects of the problem. It is noteworthy that no major divergence ever arose in the Committee.

11. - The Critical Element that affect ability to supply Libya and Tunisia also has the air power in which the enemy came gradually gaining a decisive superiority. This supremacy could be challenged in one way: by taking up a powerful offensive action deep against the air base for its position has the maximum weight on our traffic and that of Malta. Such an action, even without reaching total effects that they could hope for in the past and some of them were temporarily achieved last May, would

(*) Designation of "Army aviation."

but certainly the effect of bringing the problem in terms of possible solution.

12. - In summary:

And indeed true that "the Army of Libya would need for an uninterrupted supply of material to supply much of Tripoli as the coastal traffic towards Sirte."

It is indeed true that "the materials exist in Italy and can be made available to a large extent."

And it is also true that "*it is only necessary to navigate.*" But this is the central problem of our entire war, the problem than any had forecast that the circumstances have forced the Italian Navy: navigate tirelessly to feed an overseas war against an enemy who has been from the beginning a huge superiority vessels and that came by buying and then increasing over time the superiority of aircraft, powered by the exceptional location of the base in Malta that it has always considered his greatest strength in the Mediterranean.

The Navy has done its utmost effort to the limit of the material and staff to keep up to date the flow of supplies needed in Africa.

Continue to do so, but his chances diminish continuously and rhythm indicating the likelihood that *soon may become inadequate to any task.*

It is certain that from now on it will not be possible to ensure the minimum supply to the armies of Africa, despite any sacrifice, if the Axis will not regain the aerial prevalence in the central Mediterranean, starting with the resumption of effective action and continues it on the base of Malta.

Riccardi

LOGISTICS SITUATION IN LIBYA
On 11th December 1942

GOVERNOR GENERAL OF LIBYA
COMANDO SUPERIORE ARMED FORCES OF LIBYA
General Staff

P.M. 11, on December 11, 1942

Comando Supremo

No. 01/20282 Op. To Marshal Cavallero.

Even before I summarize the command of the eastern front was also unanimously agreed with you, Mr. Marshal, at his meeting on November 13 & as the minutes of the meeting that you copy, be essential that new media, primarily tanks & Germanic types of artillery, & sensitive reinforcements of aviation were made flow quickly from Italy together with anti-tank weapons ammunition fuels spare parts, and other supplies. Since then, and it's been a month, if the enemy has progressed more slowly than expected, new needs, however, have added to the existing & namely: first, those of the west front, which absorbs more and more forces from Libya (until now R.E.Co. "Lodi" three battalions, six batteries small caliber plus four from 20, media & services personnel); second: those of set-up position of Buerat, which lies on a bare & everywhere well traveled ground, now devoid of defensive even minimal, for whom lack for more reinforcement materials and tools work time required. Since then, conversely, though many have been my insistence, I have come here reinforcements & supplies not already extraordinary as agreed, but below normal that calls not only in serious crisis & without previous fuels, which are the life here, but shortages each service & reserve foodstuff. Wanting to cite some figures, although it is already known at you, remember the main arrivals of troops & means after 13 November: sixteen tanks M/14, the twenty-eight armored cars of the R.E.Co. "Lodi", twenty-eight small-caliber cannons, sixty-nine pieces of 47, twenty-four arms 20, twenty-seven 81 mm. mortars, small arms varied; Eighty vehicles & twenty trailers, motorcycles are one hundred and ninety; approximately two hundred thousand men of R.E.Co. "Lodi", the 31st Tank regiment & "GG.FF." anti-tank companies. As for food supplies ammunition, fuels & various materials, always from 13 November to today, I have come in the bulk for the R. Army less than eight thousand tons, against a monthly requirement at average, again for only R. Army, estimated at

more than thirty thousand tons; is arriving that is little more than a quarter of the supply occurring in the normal line & are accordingly decreased not just the already modest stocks. Every my insistence therefore seems not only justified but necessary because if I can in good conscience claim to have for the second time did not even what seemed possible to get, to give consistency to our forces, this thing that Marshal Rommel has frankly acknowledged, I must Also keep in mind that the slowness with which the enemy has so far thickened his forces east sign of weakness but the way to present the new fight with overwhelming superiority. Neither we also forget the inferiority of our qualitative tanks & of our anti-tank, all too familiar to the soldiers themselves. It is therefore, I repeat, my duty to tell You, Mr. Marshal, that the situation may become untenable, even regardless of the enemy, but only for logistical failure. This situation, which does not hesitate to call agonizing, becoming more public, & is spreading, despite every effort, not unfounded feeling that Libya abandoned at herself. To remove this feeling, there is so that half, that is ready satisfaction of those needs that you yourself you recognized indispensable November 13, which I have just now mentioned, et they buy each time more compelling value. Here, I can say, as a soldier & as commander, we are all ready to commit as always & inexhaustible faith with whole our duty, but also the faith can become useless if it is not supplemented by force.

BASTICO

MEETING BASTICO - ROMMEL
of December 17, 1942

GOVERNOR GENERAL OF LIBYA
COMANDO SUPERIORE ARMED FORCES OF LIBYA

General Staff

P.M. 11, on December 17, 1942, at 21:00

Comando Supremo.

No. 01/20584 Op. Today, December 17 11:30 am following a request by Marshal Rommel I met with him at Buerat. Interview as always inspired serenity & frankness. Marshal Rommel having exposed the current situation of ACIT & it is past then consider further developments given situation utter lack of supplies & promised reinforcements & either almost absolute certainty that nothing or very little will arrive. Given that 'animus' Rommel, as I predicted & reported, it is definitely geared at abandoned Tripoli purpose to gather under a single command that he judges necessary ACIT forces & Tunisia forces, having justified his view by saying:

First: in the current situation it is possible that provided resistance to the bitter end positions west of Buerat (which he says he only accepted because ordered) can be carried out with hope for success deficiency defensive structures & ammunition shortage & for fuels that do not allow active defense;

Second: accept battle positions west of Buerat under current conditions would be a disaster;

Third: withdraw of successive lines with supplies deficit but with proper conduct operations would be possible to delay advance of the enemies;

Fourth: subsequent line that could offer greater possible resistance line is Homs-Cussabat- Tarhuna-Garian;

Fifth: final withdrawal should in any way be made on line of Gabes;

Sixth: the solution I proposed is only one that can give hope to resume, along with troops Tunisia, offensive westward or eastward.

Closed exhibition of Marshal Rommel.

I must say that I had not the impression that Rommel current strategic tactic & logistics situation in Tunisia. I made presentation to Rommel:

First: I agree with him in thinking can not lead, with probability success, on the west line Buerat defensive battle in the current conditions of readiness & supplies;

Second: in the current situation of fuel scarcity given vehicles available after the battle of Egypt, would not be in any way we can bring our troops to Tunisia is that our factories & Intendenza depots, without which it could not be done any action in Tunisia;

Third: if it were excluded possibility to resist to the bitter end on the line Buerat agree with him in thinking that one line can to be prepared to defend to the east to the bitter end is Homs-Cussabat- Tarhuna-Garian, which lends itself better than others, to nature, to a defensive organization, for another hour nonexistent;

Fourth: a resistance to the bitter end on the line Homs allow a partial evacuation to Tunisia of Tripolitanian logistics appliance;

Fifth: any decision to be taken is closely linked to what is happening in Tunisia & particularly the opportunity to expand, consolidate feed the current precarious beachhead;

Sixth, however these are of exceptional strategic decisions - political - moral, every decision must be made, without any pressure from our side, from the high authorities;

Seventh: I join his request to submit the above judgment Comando Supremo with asked to know as soon as possible decisions;

Eighth: waiting confirm explicitly to resist to the bitter end on the west Buerat locations chosen by him.

Add to own control some of my considerations:

First: I think that as already at Agheila & Buerat so, also for line Homs Marshal Rommel will represent equal reasons to come to similar conclusions that fall back quickly for lack of means & fuels;

Second: the line was brought east of Buerat & used the little

material reinforcement, work tools, mines, links gleaned, after which nothing remained in the east;

Third: the 500 vehicles painstakingly collected to enable shifting from Agheila the '*La Spezia*' division is insufficient to transfer to other line not only "*La Spezia*" but also division "*Trieste*", now reconstituted, & numerous other units, batteries & services flowed from the west on the line Buerat;

Fourth: Homs line would involve abandonment population & territory Misuratino & entail loss of almost all Libyan Sahara troops, which would provide, for withdraw, with very few means available, one bad track Sciuref-Mizda;

Fifth: employment airfields in Sirtica & Misuratino, make unusable port Tripoli;

Sixth: withdraw to Tunisia, which would aggravate & extend the reach above considerations, would consequently lost most troops & stores et all depots, as withdrawal from Agheila referred almost exclusively to three infantry divisions, but now, in addition to four divisions & numerous reconstructed & semi territorial units, evacuation involve logistics base east of Tripoli that was always fundamental to Libya.

I conclude by expressing the opinion that defense to the bitter end positions Buerat, where troops would do their duty as always everything, is still best but on condition that Motherland them immediately truly exceptional effort to reach the east purpose in essential supplies & means.

BASTICO.

LETTER FROM MAR. BASTICO TO MAR. CAVALLERO
of 2 December 1942

GOVERNOR GENERAL OF LIBYA
COMANDO SUPERIORE ARMED FORCES OF LIBYA
General Staff

on 21 December 1942, 13:10

Comando Supremo

01/20774 Op. To Marshal Cavallero.

Your received 34155 Op. together with 34157 Op. Duce signature.

I am convinced of the need to resist on the Buerat positions as long as possible but are of equal warning that situation should be considered with realistic sense & namely on the basis of contingent possibilities created by the forces available, the characteristics of the chosen position, by the situation of supplies, & in particular fuel & munitions.

First, the forces are known. I dare say that miracles have been made to increase efficiency qualitative and quantitative & especially needed in terms of artillery, but now I do not have neither a man nor a pieces available, having also had to provide, after your order, strengthening the sector at Gabes, There & it is well known that our tanks, reduced to sixty, & our anti-tank weapons, are unable to effectively oppose at those opponents.

Second, the position of Buerat, that Marshal Rommel in the interview with him to Agheila November 22 had explicitly stated that the only possible & says today be his was imposed, does not offer footholds Tactical some consistency, a sandy plateau east, without any domain on the ground in front, viable in every sense & easily avoidable. To make this position requires strong work & huge amount material strengthening of the east where there is no more availability. We must therefore accept what it is for the operational purposes, that is inherently weak from every point of view and without it could be improved in a short time.

Third, all possible measures logistic actions to meet the situation have been implemented, even managing to be a truck Bn. 500 strong working vehicles, but also in this field today with what I dispose it is possible to do more. Ammunition

is reduced for calibers from 1.5 at 3 unfoc & therefore does not meet the needs of a prolonged & vigorous defense. The fuels situation is more and more critical and that the small and more unsafe the Tunisian intake not improve significantly. It is so as not to allow use of armored vehicles maneuvered & even motorized units. If the situation does not change, it must therefore think not of an active defense but mostly static. To this we must add that the shortage of aviation gasoline limits thus measure the contribution of aviation already poor that they can not count on this as an effective means of offense & therefore effective contribution to the defense.

This situation is realistically considered but also objectively. And though, even abstracting from "animus" of Marshal Rommel who does not hide to suffer rather than accept the situation persists and the need of a retreat into Tunisia, thus acting in the negative on the will combative & command of the troops, I confirm that prolonged Resistance on the positions of Buerat for that time presumably not short, of which is mention in your radio 34155 Op., can not be detached from the exceptional effort that at my radio 01/20584 of 7 December. So I think it was my duty to say, and not-for- disclaimer but necessary clarification. And since the Duce asks me to acknowledge receipt of your radio 34157 Op., I would be grateful if you would also tell him the contents of this.

BASTICO

DIRECTIVES OF THE COMANDO SUPREMO
DEVELOPMENTS ON THE OPERATION OF WITHDRAW

COMANDO SUPREMO

The UNITS

Operations Office - Theater. Africa

Prot. N. 34245 Op.

P.M. 21, on December 27, 1942

The Italian Marshal Ettore Bastico

Comandante Superiore Armed Forces of Libya.

Subject: Guidelines for the operations.

I. -The Duce took note of your telegram 01/20951/Op. on the 25th cm. and asked me to confirm that the task of the A.C.I.T. is to stand on the positions of Buerat "as long as possible." It is clear that a resistance to the bitter end that he was pushing, according to the hypothesis accepted by you, the annihilation of the armored army, would not accretive the goal. The war in North Africa (Libya and Tunisia-Algeria) should be considered in a unified manner and the operations of the A.C.I.T. must be placed in this operational framework together.

II. - The retreat from the position of Marsa El-Brega Agheila there was imposed by the inability, due to the repeated sinkings, to arrive in time reinforcements and the necessary means.

The line Buerat could get this far a minimum of daily food, but sending substantial reinforcements has not been possible despite efforts to this end; nor is it to be expected that this can be achieved in the coming weeks (directly on Tripoli precluded; little potential of Tunis-Tripoli by land for such destruction of locomotives and the scarcity of vehicles due to the sinking; withdrawal occurred a strong share of German air transport for sending to Russia, etc.)

III. - The above conditions and the observed inability to feed at the same time the two theaters of war Tunisian and Libyan pose a limit to the duration of our resistance to the position of Buerat, provided that the gain time is for us the essential prerequisite.

Therefore, set by you the beginning of the movement according to the concept of not exposing the troops of the ACIT in irreparable losses, our position must take place gradually and for different phases (lines Buerat, Homs, Tripoli, of Zuara, etc.) and counteroffensive be based

on the action of the mobile and armored units.

IV. -While this maneuver you will be doing, the troops of the Tunisian theater act to save space as much as possible to the west, to make way for the troops of the A.C.I.T. that they were to be used in those zones and to facilitate its subsequent deployment.

V. -In the meantime, the Comando Supremo intensify by all means the flow of supplies, especially fuel; to this end it is necessary that the means of the corresponding transport are not distracted for other purposes. In this condition, which is life for the A.C.I.T., any other requirement must be conditional.

VI. - Evacuations. It left Superlibia the task of determining the full set of measures relating thereto.

Meanwhile urgent:

1 - bring immediately to the south Gabes everything that can be useful (managers, units, workers) to speed up defensive work, already ordered;

- ensuring with units taken from the principals of Tripolitania organization of coastal defense from the Libyan border to Gabes (possible threats from Malta);

2 - evacuate to Tunisia the most useful elements for operating, equipment, stores and warehouses of the intendenza;

- establish in Tunisia, available to the XXX Corps, media and units for air defense and coastal to leave undefended gradually area of Tripolitania, not excluding Tripoli, with priority to the means and units more efficient, and proceeding to dismissals necessary;

- Accelerate evictions of to alternate on Italy, also via Tunis;

3 - subject to for the tasks now called, vacate to Italy other military personnel that can not be used in the new situation.

VII. -Make unusable the Port of Tripoli arrangements separately.

VIII. - The general officer of the Comando Supremo, the bearer of this paper, will also illustrate in detail the general situation and provide any other relevant information that was desired.

The Chief of General Staff General
UGO CAVALLERO

Note. The directives were delivered by Gen. Gandin the morning of the 29th, after the authorization received from Rome on the evening of the 28th.

MEETING BASTICO - ROMMEL
of December 31, 1942

GOVERNOR GENERAL OF LIBYA
Comandante Superiore Armed Forces of Libya
General Staff

December 31, 1942

Comando Supremo

No. 01/21240 Op. To Marshal Cavallero.

Today had talks with Marshal Rommel preceded by brief conversation with Marshal Kesselring. This interview General Gandin. I talked Rommel, for the part concerning his, Directives referred your 34245 Op. 27 current. Marshal Rommel considers it essential, if you want to avoid possible annihilation of large Italian & Germanic units not mobile, not to engage them in combat & start of immediate withdrawal from positions Buerat, & echelons for successive lines.

He believes that total disengagement non mobile Divisions to Buerat positions can be carried out in eight days. Rommel then intends to remain on the Buerat positions with only mobile troops, but did not want to commit to not immediately use up & then be in difficulty during withdraw operation. He has explicitly stated that withdrawal will be processed followed by Agheila to Buerat, that is escaping at fighting both at Buerat and further back, & that also once he received the withdraw order, intend to be left fully referee to determine the next time for maneuver. Resistance positions of Buerat it is thus practically excluded at the outset & entities gain time remains with speed at enemy advance. Rommel decided attitude relate to the need to avoid irreparable losses imposed on the non-mobile troops, which he needs in my view overestimates; but, at my opinion, it contrasts sharply with your directive to hold the positions of Buerat for as long as possible. Besides, he said that any other solution would risk annihilation of the least by larger non-mobile. By accepting the thesis of Rommel immediate withdraw, it is almost certainly to be sacrificed the troops of the Libyan Sahara & the bulk of the Tripolitanian troops and much of the factories & warehouses & equipment of the Intendenza. It is superfluous to add that immediate withdrawal would certainly detected by the enemy giving new boldness & quickness to his pursuit

now held by our deployment Buerat. It is also worth pointing out that during any general withdraw are needed supplies of fuel about 900 tons daily between us & the Germans & the air force. Instead giving fair value at your order to resist as long as possible on the positions of Buerat & accepting that a defensive battle, to which all of our are now oriented, conducted with all the force, you might have success, gain more time & also safeguard our military prestige that withdraws repeated without fighting compromise in the eyes of our own troops. Because my thoughts disagrees sharply from that Marshal Rommel, & it was not also possible in today's conversation reconcile accepting the wishes expressed by Rommel, & that for my part fully agree, I represent the need to make known to me with the utmost urgency, which of his solutions this Command believe adopt & consequence such explicit orders are to be given to Marshal Rommel.

BASTICO

COMMUNICATION FROM MAR. ROMMEL
of December 31, 1942

To Superlibia

Urgent

To the Italian Marshal Etc. Bastico - Governor General of Libya.

In reference to the interview today, and to the directives had later, extend to known to you my thoughts on the details, as well as my intentions. To move items property with 500 vehicles made available by you, wanting to rescue all the staff and material to a possible capture by the enemy, it takes, at least, 10 days.

Waiting with this shift until the beginning of the enemy attack, I do not think bearable. I am convinced that the bulk of non-mobile troops will not have time to move to safety. The enemy attack can be achieved in the coming days. And then you need to start immediately move immobile items. Please, therefore, to put on their way to the front, the planned 500 vehicles possibly even by 1/1 the result that we can begin transporting even in the night on 01/02/43.

I intend to bring immobile items instantly divided into three or four groups on the positions of Tarhuna-Homs, the result that the XX Corp fall back to Bani Walid moving into the region south of Tarhuna. The XXI Corp. fall back along the Via Balbi, to occupy positions in the area of Homs.

I consider inappropriate employment of intermediate positions by immobile unit, between the current position of the army and that of Tarhuna-Homs.

Because, in case of a strong enemy pressure, it will not be made in time to transport these immobile elements. In the position of Buerat this mass still, according to the possibility of the means of transport, it will be replaced, in stages, from motorized shares.

Task of the forces, such mobile as immobile, on the positions of Buerat, is to keep them as long as possible. Only if the pressure of overwhelming enemy forces, or in the case of circumvention, fall back on a favorable line: Sedada- B. el Ghurgia. Although this position will try to delay and stop as long as possible the enemy advance. The second intermediate position to the mobile units will be located on-line Bani Walid Misrata. Only here the mobile units, in case of overwhelming enemy pressure, fall back on the main line: south-Tarhuna Homs. I have not specifically prepared for a possible further withdrawal,

over positions Tarhuna-Homs, to the west. It is hoped to stop on this strong position, as long as possible, the enemy advance between the two lines, precisely Buerat and Tarhuna-Homs.

A success of this operation plan, according to my perception, is only fully possible when you will immediately start moving the immobile mass.

Please therefore accept my intentions and to do everything possible to ensure that the 500 promised me, are, at the earliest, on the march.

To make clear my plan of operations, I will send you, tomorrow, a relevant chart.

ROMMEL
16/42 Secret

THE DIRECTIVES OF THE SUPREME COMMANDER ON THE MODE
OF THE OPERATION OF WITHDRAW

COMANDO SUPREMO

The UNIT

Operations Office -Theater. Africa

P.M. 21, January 1, 1943, 21:00

To *Superlibia*.

No. 30013 Op. Superlibia for Marshal Bastico.

The Duce familiarized with your telegram 01/21240. Opinion your opinion & Rommel are extreme and opposing each other; both conflict with directives of the Comando Supremo.

- 1st - Directives 34245 December 27, the Comando Supremo remain unchanged.
- 2nd - Battle defensive positions of Buerat with all forces is to be excluded.
- 3rd - Dropping of infantry starting with the less mobile should be made outside the direct pressure of the opponent.
- 4th - Movements can be initiated at any time, is subject to the next n ordered. 5.
- 5th - The gain of time depends on the action of the counter-offensive on the most advanced mobile forces of the opponent. This must be done to deliver, & aid of the aviation.
- 6th - To make the removal of the elements & materials useful for the further conduct of the war is a must:
 - a) Gain about three weeks before the mobile units & armored of the ACIT have reached the position of Homs;
 - b) Earn about three more weeks before mobile & armored forces of the ACIT have reached the eastern front of the fortified camp in Tripoli.
- 7th - After reaching the position of Homs examined, together with Rommel, & if you do know & what units can be started directly without compromising Gabes conduct the operation as is prescribed.
- 8th -In The framework of the time, under no. 6, is given space to maneuver to Marshal Rommel, who is responsible that the times given are obtained.
- 9th - Having to coordinate conduct maneuver with the situation on the Tunisian front the Comando Supremo will intervene with subsequent orders.

UGO CAVALLERO

1st ARMY COMMAND
GENERAL STAFF

P.M. 11, on February 10, 1943 -XXI.

MEMORANDUM

To Excellence General Vittorio Ambrosio
Army Chief of Staff General

PM 21

I summarize in this memo first impressions derived from a comprehensive review of the situation of the 1st Army and the various problems attaching to strengthen it (limited to the Italian share), to make it suitable means to cope with the task that is proposed.

The data and figures collected here have not so exact value of documentation but are rather indicative, in order to establish orders of magnitude and above. The one and the other will be clarified and translated into concrete demands from hand to hand that I will be allowed to proceed in the examination of the various specific fields.

1. -Weapons

The deficiencies of arms *before* the withdraw from the position of Buerat were the following:

a) *Infantry Weapons:*

Submachine's	120
machine Guns cal. 8	150
Auto cannons 20 mm.	120
Anti-Tank Rifles "S"*	60
guns 47/32	170

The figures are certainly increased, but not to a very appreciable, due to losses during the retreat.

b) *armored vehicles:*

The so-called "Centauro Combat Group" came to the position of Mareth, practically, no materials.

The data reported here refer therefore to the whole of the "Centauro" division that currently depends on the XXX Corps, being moved with the bulk north of the 34° parallel.

Deficiencies:

Tanks	148 (compared to the new formation: 73)
Semoventi	20 (compared to the new formation: 92)
armored cars	28

There are also 38 armored cars inefficient, for which repair seems to lack the necessary spare parts.

*=Solothurn

In that case the deficiency would be of 66 armored cars.

With respect to the tanks and semoventi it is to take into account the low value of the first, in relation to the more powerful armored vehicles and anti-tank of the enemy, and if the motive still maintains a significant value.

c) *Artillery:*

For completion of the unit of the Army, already deployed on the line of Mareth need:

75/27 -5 batteries and 2 groups	44 pieces
105/28 -1 battery and 1 group	12 pieces
90/53 -1 battery	4 pieces
75/50 - 1 battery	4 pieces
100/17 -2 batteries	8 pieces

Batteries and groups mentioned above should be sent to the full staff and vehicles.

For the strengthening of the position of Mareth it is also imperative the influx of long-range groups (149/40 -88/55 -90/53 -105 / 28) to be assigned in reinforcing clusters of the Corp

2. -Vehicles.

For the completion of the unit of the Army need:

Heavy Trucks	590
Light Trucks	491
Cars	146
Tractors	90
Motorcycles	475

It should be noted also the status of use of the vast majority of vehicles in service, so they are forced to go to repair the other. Next to the completion above you would therefore urgently need the progressive renewal of about 40% of the existing vehicles.

3. -Munitions.

Outstanding amounts at the units and depots of the intendenza amounted to approximately 1.5 *unfoc*.

The inflow of ammunition to achieve a level of safety at least ammunition (2-3 *unfoc*) is extremely urgent. Next, but without interruption, should bring the availability at a level such as to be able to develop without concerns the action of artillery that the excellent observation offered by the position of the Mareth allows, for the purpose of subjecting the enemy since his approach to a daily depressing state of subjection.

4. -Fuel.

The current situation (330 tons. Petrol, 120 tons. Diesel) is the requirement for the ordinary performance of the services for a

period of 5 days for petrol, of days 1.5 for diesel..

We need to achieve a consistency in place equal to the normal requirements of 15 days, plus a reserve for the execution of any operating movements.

Such consistency corresponds to a minimum:

Petrol tons. 1500

Oil tons. 2000

5. -Personnel.

a) *Official*: As already verbally agreed with the Chief of General Excellence should consider replacing the current leaders of the XX and XXI Corps (Generals Bitossi and Navarini), with Generals Berardi Paolo and Orlando. It is urgent that the movement takes place as soon as possible in order to give time to new commanders to immediately settle in. The commander of the Defense Tripolitania, General Roncaglia, may be immediately repatriated, without replacement.

b) *Troop*:

Following the repatriation of the soldiers with more than 36 months in NA It takes total 5000 additions.

To extend the rotation, as is urgently required by obvious considerations of efficiency unit morale, the soldiers found more than 24 months in NA it takes more than 18,000 additions.

6. -Aviation.

Commander 5th Air Fleet were provided to me today the following information on the current situation of the units of the south:

Mc 202: available 49 -efficient 18

Mc 200: available 14, without pilots.

Incoming 1. group Mk 200 and the pilots for the aircraft listed above.

The northern sector is so sparse as not to provide opportunities for aid on the front of the 1st Army. No units available directly to Fleet Command.

In the face of enemy air force is very large west and south, these figures need no comment.

The rapid expansion of the Italian units of the 1st Army requires a level of affluence of materials, units and above personnel, whose arrival is of paramount importance - within the Army itself - than sending reinforcement units.

For now I can not express the degree of efficiency of the German part of the 1st Army. It must be immediately appointed the commander of the DAK

I put special emphasis, in summary, the importance of the following points:

- Long-range artillery and ammunition to take advantage from the first moment of the favorable conditions offered to us from the line of Mareth, making it costly to the enemy in the preparation phase;

- Division "Centauro": it must complete it and evoking its full availability to the 1st Army. This is due both to an absolute necessity consistency of mobile forces available, both in a state of relative opportunities of the Italian participation in this field of activity of the army itself;

- Aviation: as part of the consistency of the German Air Force (which I have not yet known) should be given to Italian aviation consistency appropriate for the tasks and such as to allow a not secondary to the ally.

The Commander of the 1st Army
Army General GIOVANNI MESSE

1st ARMY COMMAND
GENERAL STAFF - OPERATIONS OFFICE

N. 159 of prot. Op.

P.M. 11, on Feb. 8, 1943 -XXI

Subject: Situation of the Army.
Excellence General Vittorio Ambrosio
Army Chief of Staff General

Rome

Following my memo of February intend to be a little more specifically, in its various elements, the situation of the 1st Army at the time when I am about to take command. They are given and personal impressions drawn from numerous direct contacts and these days with all the commanders of the G.U. - not included any commander of German G.U. - with commanders of the regiment, battalion, company and with the same troop - and a thorough reconnaissance of the terrain of interest.

1. -The Forces.

A) *Italian units.*

The current situation of Italian unity is the annexed n. 1.

The G.U., were reconstituted "Trieste" or completed "Pistoia", "Spezia", "GG.FF.", during the retreat, with units formed with the remains of the dissolved units or recovered for the defense of the territory. Except for some deficiency, sensitive to some, they are now almost complete, from the point of view of numbers, for men, but a little less for armament.

However, the intrinsic value of the various elements reconstituted at the individual divisions varies very greatly from one to another, and is very low for several battalions.

Particular deserves mention the case of "GG.FF.", consists of two Battalion. GG.FF. three Battalion, Bersaglieri and a battalion GaF. The GG.FF. battalions, number of accessories, and as a result of the gaps created by Siwa malaria, are reduced to just over 500 men total.

Given the impossibility of reaching a completion of those Battalion., I propose contracting them into one battalion of assault GG.FF. army reserve. The division could consist of 6 Battalion. Bersaglieri, of which 5 are already present with the Army while the sixth could be sent from Italy. Pending such submission would remain with the division the GaF. Battalion. With this measure, the establishment of the division would not be changed, and it would ultimately

increased efficiency. The division could be called "Bersaglieri Africa division." Troops armed consist mostly with departments from GaF Tripoli, a long stay in the NA - And thus destined to disappear soon - and present as well as significant deficiencies qualitative personnel also deficiencies quantitative weapons.

Then there are almost totally armored units, represented by a very small battalion of the "Centauro" that numbers fifteen tanks and six semoventi. The "Centauro" is now not merely a group of armed troops, selected from the best.

4 Italian divisions, together with the meager German infantry units, are insufficient to give rise only to the deployment, from the sea to the mountainous area. It remains the extensive tract that comes up in Kebili, now entrusted to the troops of Army, not including the "Centauro" committed to the north.

Lastly, there is any mobile element of maneuver.

It is therefore essential:

- Restructuring the division "Centauro" as armored (according to the new organic, possibly with heavy tanks and better suited M 41 - that they are absolutely obsolete and that, consequently, they have lost all confidence of the tankers - with a large share of semoventi) for the constitution, together with German armored and motorized unit, of a mobile mass of maneuver;

- Do flow shares of weapons, material and personnel required to complete the units of G.U. and give it to them and the troops of the army the necessary uniformity and efficiency. I intend to specify in detail this request but, as far as the staff, will amount to the equivalent of 10 battalions and 20 batteries, to be sent to units to complete with the only weapons and individual equipment.

This request takes into account only part of the problem of the reopening of rotations for the military with over 24 months in the N.A., issue which is a high moral character, without, however, being able to be addressed, up to that substitutions are not in the site. On the whole of the army, including services, the shifts amount to about 18,000 men;

- To send a new armored division, or at least motorized.

B) *German units.*

The situation at the date of 1 February for the German units assigned to the 1st Army in the enclosed document, given me by the Commander ACIT (Annex no. 2).

The degree of attrition of these units is pushed to a point such that the combat capacity of each unit can not be that minimum. The strength of this total is not that 50% of the organic force. Much less is obviously the proportion of fighting forces

since deficiencies play a much greater extent in the share of the soldiers in that relevant services.

In the field of material deficiencies in the figures for the tanks (72%), armored cars (41%), of anti-tank weapons (84%), artillery (67%), to mention only the most obvious, are very serious.

From what I know from the Commander ACIT, for the completion of these units there is a general insurance of Hitler, the Reichsmarschall, OKW. But so far no one has a concrete plan about the influx of men and materials, which to everybody "Today it is not even begun appreciably.

The German divisions, armored and motorized, had in the past, in the general economy of the ACIT, for their superior characteristics of weapons, a fundamental function in stopping as in the collision, which can not be transferred to the Italian divisions. This comparative appreciation does not want to extend, of course, to the field of moral factors, which are equivalent in both the Allies, but it requires a realistic and honest assessment of the material factors of the situation.

It is therefore necessary:

- That the German units are quickly completed affect their efficient for the day soon the new clash with enemy forces. Their full efficiency is vital for the performance of the task entrusted to the 1st Army;

- It is known a broad agenda the influx of men and materials, in order to take them into account, as, until completion status, and the intentions in the standards that must harmonize operating in a well-defined framework as much as possible.

2. -The commands.

Quantitatively they are efficient. Qualitatively, I intend to see them to the test.

From this point of view it is urgent only possible to assign the Deputy Chief of Staff to the Command of the Army, which does not have it.

With the number 01/ 10/ Op. February 2, I requested Colonel of artillery in G.S. service of the Dandolo Battalion, however subordinating the decision to his liking. If this is not such a liking please order assigning another colonel of the G.S. suitable to the important position and its immediate presentation to this command.

It is also already been decided, during my presence in Rome, the change of the commanders of the XX Corp. and XXI Corp. it is necessary that the movement is fulfilled as soon as possible, so that new leaders have time and opportunity to acclimate and orientate in this period of relative calm, followed before long a recovery of larger operations. I therefore repeat to ask to proceed with urgency to the appointment and sending two new commanders, possibly accepting the proposals registered at the time advanced.

In order to provide first time to designate a commander for the XX Corp now commanded by General Biton who must repatriate.

Finally, I consider only right to mention the state of moral discomfort that I found in some brigadiers in charge of the command of a division, following the recent first application of the law in comparative progress choice; It occurred fact that these general officers, who have long held, and are honored to hold the command of a division in the war, have seen climb from less senior colleagues, some of whom do not have equal rank, certainly valid. It would be very dangerous if it should invade the persuasion that the command of the troops before the enemy does not constitute title key in the evaluation of the relative values.

3. -The defensive position.

A) *The location of Mareth.*

Known characteristics of the location of Mareth; on which the Army, before I came, has been ordered to get ready in defense. Defined as someone with literary elegance, the small African Maginot, it is actually a very modest fortified complex, conceived and implemented to deal with probably our strength is not large and modestly equipped with modern weaponry that the General Staff of the French believed they could advance offensively to the Libyan border. Thirty "Bunker" the evidently of small size (dismantled by our Armistice Commission) represents the totality of the elements of permanent fortifiers position. In the northern part, flat line, individual forts are clearly dominated by the ground in front. In the southern part, high, offer excellent domain of observation, but very little effectiveness shooting forward on the edge of the position that runs down and must be protected from automatic weapons from below. However, the domain of observation in depth and on the reverse of the forward-deployed opponent offered by the right sector mountain compensates the domain of observation enemy. In return, however, it is feasible only with an adequate supply of artillery, especially long range, and ammunition, especially for those long-range artillery.

Although he notes the negative response given by n. 068 / OP / A of 31 January to the be similar request. General De Stefanis, I consider it necessary to insist on the assignment of other artillery specified in Attachment no. 3.

B) *The south-west.*

It is also known that the position of Mareth is susceptible to circumvention from the west. To deal with this eventuality unlikely that anything I ordered, along with Marshal Rommel, for

basting of an array closing the threshold between the *Jebel* and the head of the Tebaga mountain: weak embankment to stop enemy offensive actions not huge or give time for the action of those who will be the reserves, in the case of an attack in forces.

C) *The west front.*

The sooner the Army will also take over the current area of division "Centauro", characterized today by a state of equilibrium that might tend to break, against us, in the near future, forcing the use of other forces in that direction, particularly sensitive, indeed even vital to the very existence of the 1st Army.

D) *Retarding action.*

In order to delay as much as possible and with a minimum of losses, the approach of the enemy to the position of Mareth, a strong rearguard mechanized troops still remains up to the Libyan border and fall back only slowly under the action of overwhelming enemy forces.

You can not appreciate the duration of this phase will be determined mainly by the initiative of the opponent, so far committed to maximum in the reconstitution of its own logistics base, which will help the gradual re-use of the port of Tripoli already in place.

E) *The forward position.*

It was established to oppose the opponent one last stop, forward the position of Mareth, along the line of course strong enough to Gebel Tebaga-Gebel Remtisa-Gebel Guelass-Wadi Zeuss. This line, for its characteristics, is in itself the most effective barrier offered by nature in this area to an offense from Libya; on it were deployed as of now a share of infantry and artillery divisions deployed in position of strength. Function of this line is to delay as much as possible the approach of the enemy to the position of Mareth beating promptly with artillery fire and force him to slow their advance and to deploy. Troops engaged therein is to undertake at the appropriate time and fall back within the positions of Mareth, assuming the deployment for them even now prepared.

In this way the Army has planned to carry out as part of the task forces available to resist to the bitter end in the very wide sector assigned to it, and the sea at Sened has a development of more than 200 km.

F) *The line of Chotts.*

A realistic view of the situation, however, requires to consider as of now the possibility of a future development which could be

contemporary of the attack superior forces from the south and west or not even one embankment for pressure from the south, which would make it necessary to adopt a contraction of the front of the grid. In this case it may be necessary to gather the north of the so-called line of *chotts*, creating an saving of more than 100 km. in front, such as to allow the availability of reserves to parry the threat on both fronts.

I might say that if it were in my power, in its time, to choose the position of strength of the army, I decided to line the *chotts*. In this sense, too, I expressed to the then Chief of General Staff, before leaving Italy to come to Tunisia. A possible forced withdrawal of the army from the ground to Mareth and Akarit under the pressure of the enemy, it offers serious difficulties in having to flow through the defilade of Gabes under the action of an enemy aircraft predictably prevailing and the fact of having to make in more echelons, in relation to the known poor availability of vehicles for transport. It should be noted that the great majority of the artillery lacks its own means of transport. However, the Army shall take into account mentioned, which, as I said, could be at any given time need categorical, starting and increasing the extent possible the preparation of a line of *chotts*.

4. -The most urgent needs of the preparation.

The deal, which allowed to rescue, on one road and about 250 km. the bulk of the A.C.I.T. It was accomplished through great effort that constitutes a title of merit for those who have direct and accomplished.

But it must not ignore the fact that men have come out of these enormous tested in the physical and troubled in spirit. They're worn out materials.

The effort, however, would remain fruitless if at this time we have available until the next battle the forces drawn into balance did not receive the necessary reinforcement to face again the impact.

For the Italian units the most urgent needs are represented by personnel, tanks, long-range artillery and *semoventi*, ammunition, suitable antitank artillery, vehicles, fuel.

Similarly to the German units.

In another plan, as it relates primarily to efficiency morale of the troops, other needs are no less urgent, but easier to implement because it have very little impact on the extent of transport: mail, regular attendance of basic provisions (wine , tobacco, etc.), distribution of some unit newspaper. You can not forget that the Army troops participating from November to depressing phenomenon of folding resulting in a defeat.

It should, because regain the self-confidence, they find here, I would say

they discover here almost by themselves, that something new has occurred. But this something, besides a new and passionate moral action which has already begun, can not be represented by that new means that the country prepares for its troops to enable them to face the enemy in the non- excessive inferiority.

In all now, until the last soldier entered the belief that the fight can not be decided only by the value of the men - if that were the case we would have already won the war - but from having the availability of means not lower or almost, to those of the opponent: artillery, tanks, aviation.

We must not forget that the battle of Alamein the enemy has won precisely because of the overwhelming superiority of artillery, tanks, aviation.

I decided to expose honestly and bluntly as it precedes a true picture of the situation, without attenuation and without pessimism.

It remains firmly, however, that everyone - from the commander to the simple soldier - will observe delivery of doing their duty to the end.

The General of the Army Commander
GIOVANNI MESSE

Appendix n.1 to sheet n. 159/Op. of 8 February 1943 - XXI
SITUATION OF ITALIAN UNITS AS OF 10 February 1943-XXI

UNIT	Battalion A.S. 42	Battalion MG	Battalion Tank	A/T Co.	Co & Bn 81MM	Armored Car Squad.	Recon., Co.	Batteries			Mech. Means			Notes
								Hvy. Field	Med Field	A/A	Tank	Sem.	Armored	
Div. "GG.FF."	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	15	-	2	-	-	-	(*) of which 14 effective
Div. "Trieste"	6	-	-	-	2	-	-	12	-	2	-	-	-	
Corp Troops	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	5	-	-	-	-	
Total XX Corp	12	-	-	-	2	-	-	31	5	4	-	--	-	
Div. "Pistoia"	7	1	-	-	5	-	-	15	-	3	-	-	-	
Div. "Spezia "	7	2	-	3	3	-	-	10	-	2	-	-	-	
Corp Troops	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	9	6	2	-	-	-	
Total XXI Corp	15	3	-	3	8	-	-	34	6	6	-	-	-	
Army troops	7	6	1	10	1	2	10	27	12	34	50	6	40	
Total	34	9	1	13	11	2	10	92	23	45	(*)50	6	40	

Appendix n.2 to sheet n. 159/Op. of 8 February 1943 - XXI
STATE OF EFFICIENCY OF GERMAN UNITS AS OF 1 February 1943-XXI

UNIT		Weapons								Personnel					Notes
		Tank	AC	A/T	Lt Gun	Med Gun	Hv Gun	A/A	Mtr	men	Tank co.	rifle co	A/T co	bty	
15th Pz.div.	Organic.	66	-	50	14	9	-	-	14	6203	6	5	3	7	
	deficient	100	-	102	16	3	-	-	22	7210	2	7	-	2	
90th Lt. div.	Organic	-	-	29	13	3	-	-	18	5592	-	18	-	2	
	deficient	71	-	154	21	5	-	-	6	5142	-	6	2	4	
164tg Lt. Div	Organic	-	-	16	5	-	-	-	28	4290	-	14	-	1	
	deficient	-	-	198	29	8	-	-	8	8574	-	10	2	5	
Para. Bd.	Organic	-	-	16	-	-	-	5	29	1551	-	6	-	4	
	deficient	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Rgt. Granatieri	Organic	-	-	17	2	-	-	-	7	1219	-	8	-	-	
	deficient	-	-	37	2	-	-	-	3	1791	-	-	-	-	
Recon. Bns.	Organic	-	(*) 47	11	2	-	-	-	-	1064	-	-	-	-	
	deficient	-	(*) 85	3	6	-	-	-	-	727	-	-	-	-	
19th div. cc	Organic	-		-	-	-	-	36	115	6831	-	-	-	19	
	deficient	-		-	-	-	-	17	35	3403	-	-	-	1	
Army Art.	Organic	-		-	-	3	15	9	-	1195	-	-	-	9	
	deficient	-		-	-	15	33	9	-	1386	-	-	-	13	
Total	Organic	66	47	125	36	15	15	49	209	27925	6	51	3	42	
	deficient	171	85	494	76	31	33	26	76	28332	6	23	4	25	

* of which 35 armored car and 12 armored trucks

** of which 25 armored car and 60 armored trucks

REQUIREMENTS ARTILLERY

1st block (send urgently):

- loose pieces: 149/28 (2), 105/28 (10), 100/17 (6), 75 / 27-11 (4), 75 / 27-06 (5), 90/53 auto (3), 75/46 (4 with devices for central range), SK 75/50 (6), 75/18 semoventi (2), 65/17 (20), needed for completion of units;
- 10 command tanks of 75/18; "
- 20 pots for 75/46, 10 of 76/40.6 to 76/45;
- 70 Graduator for shells to spool mechanics of AC 75/46; -4 Graduator for gun 75/50;
- 1 Full range center;
- 3 large base ranging finding telescopes to (3 and 4 m.).

2nd block (units in full):

- 2 Groups 149/40 or 149/35 with elastic suspension caissons; -4 Groups 105/28;
- 4 Groups 75/32.

COMANDO SUPREMO
GENERAL STAFF AFRICA
OPERATIONS OFFICE - ARMY SEC.

P.M. 21, on Feb. 17, 1943-XXI

Prot. N. 0346/Op./A -Risp. f. W59 /Op. 8 corr.
Subject: the Army.

To commander of the 1st Army -General Staff.

The Military Post. 11

1. - Strengthening of the Tunisian theater -with particular regard to the 1st Army -has done under close scrutiny by this Comando Supremo.

According to the General Staffs of the Armed Forces and with the German, it was first recognized the need to ensure a starting total of 50,000 tons per month. of materials and 30,000 of fuel.

To create harmonious now to what it had to have a decrease in sending the vehicles particularly of intendancies - having recognized that those currently existing on the theater are sufficient to temporary meet the different needs.

2. -Regarding especially the 1st Army:

I -It is approved the establishment of the Bersaglieri of Africa Div. They will be sent for this purpose two new Bersaglieri Battalion.

With the two Battalion. GG.FF. will be made - as proposed - a GG.FF. assault Battalion.

II - For "Centauro" div. will be immediately sent to the artillery regiment (with priority), a new Bersaglieri Battalion., to replace the one given to the 5th Army, and all the loose tanks available.

It has not been possible to settle the return of the tank Battalion ceded to the 5th Army will provide the sending of other tank units from Italy.

III -You could accede to the request of starting a new armored unit, for unavailability. The question of sending a motorized division is

He was also subjected to the Duce. The decision was in the negative because:
-in Italy remained one motorized division; -there would be insurmountable transport difficulties.

IV- It was ordered, pending clarifications announced by this Command, sending staff equivalent to 10 Battalion. and 20 batteries, to be sent to complete units, with only the armament and individual equipment.

With such personnel are believed to alternation those who already have 36-month stay in Africa, while for those who have 24 must provide themselves in succession of time, in relation to their number and to the possibility of transport.

V -For the artillery will be done within the limits of possibility, drawing also from those deployed in the territory or in other armies.

For those long-range it was also involved the German side.

It is also examining the possibility of a certain number of anti-tank pieces of war booty of caliber appropriate to the armor of enemy tanks.

3. -With the implementation of the above measures, which will be completed with urgency, it is relying that the situation of the 1st Army may improve somewhat.

The Chief of General
AMBROSIO

1st ARMY COMMAND
Operations Office

1150/Op. secret

P.M. 11, on March 2, 1943-XXI

ORDER OF OPERATION No. 1

Subject: Action "Capri."

Maps attached: 1.

1. - The 1st Army will perform on X the offensive operation "Capri." Purpose: turing and annihilation of enemy forces currently being deployed between Medenine and Mareth positions.

For these actions were assigned to the Army the 10th and 21st armored divisions.

2. - Situation enemy: see. daily news information.

3. - The attack will be done by the following groups of forces (see. Attached diagram n. 1) [Omitted]:

a) *Column 'Adler' - Lieutenant General Ziegler* (DAK with 10th, 15th and 21st Arm. divisions).

Flow into the open with the 15th and 21st divisions and by the passes of Gebel Tebaga and with the 10th road of Ksar Hallouf focusing strongly on the line of hills from Zemlet Lebene and Metameur.

Reached this line, on which we must establish momentum, the column will converge with the mass northward to annihilate the enemy forces, mainly artillery, deployed forward to our advanced position.

The 10th Arm. Div. will in particular, once it reaches the area of Metameur, protection to the south and east.

10th Div. is assigned the Luck group (two Battalion. and a group of the 164th Infantry div. - 3rd and 33rd Recon. Bns.) for protection from the south and southeast of the attack device. For this purpose the group Luck block with the forces of the 164th Light the way to Fom Tatahouine at Bir el Ahmar, leaning right at Gebel el Oubarir. The G.E. will explore the south and in the space between group 164th and Medenine.

Reserve orders for the further continuation of the operation.

b) Column "Bari" -General von Sponeck (groups attacking infantry divisions "Spezia", the 90th Light, "Trieste," each of two Battalion. and two groups).

Frontal attack with the goal line hill 214 of Zamlet Lebene Mussa -Uadi Achichana - Uadi el Mertoum.

The division "GG.FF." held similar action by regulating the movement of his right hand on that of the "Trieste".

4. - The attack will begin, without artillery preparation, at 06:00, at the same time by all columns.

5. - The unit is not used in the action of attack referred to in paragraph 3) will maintain the occupation of the positions of Mareth (forward position and location of resistance).

6. - *Artillery.*

a) The artillery of C.A. and A. (excluding heavy artillery German 100, 170, 210 referred to in the following paragraph), and the artillery of the divisions that remain to protect the positions, will contribute to support the outcome of the columns from the forward positions and their attack.

Particularly concerned with the neutralization of the enemy batteries deployed in the area north-west of Metameur, and observatories.

It will make any necessary changes to the current deployment without undermining the overall strength of the defensive positions.

b) The German heavy artillery (100, 170, 210) gathered in a group assigned to the DAK, will support the aforesaid outlet and will follow as soon as the DAK with the mass.

c) Retention of orders for the allocation and use of batteries special mortars.

d) anti-aircraft Artillery:

- German. The 19th Flak Division, with the mass will act in favor of the attacking columns with action on the ground and A/T: allocations to the columns of attack by command division, prior arrangements with artillery command of the Army.

The remaining share remains available for the A/T defense on the positions of Mareth.

Against enemy isolated aircraft flying over positions of the waiting Arm. divisions, Will act only the batteries normally used for the defense A/T of the area; only in case of attack by air formations will be in action all batteries A/T;

- *Italian*. Italian A/T Artillery will continue in the current task of defending the deployment of the XX and XXI Corps.

7. - *Engineers*.

Will open the gates of the minefields and the adjustments necessary to allow the outlet of the columns from the starting positions.

Possibly they will be awarded to the individual columns of the same elements that have already proceeded to the placement of the minefields and know location and organization.

8. - *Air Force*.

Day X-1:

- a) attacks on enemy air fields;
- b) protection of the queue positions of the armor divisions.

Day X:

- a) starting from 6 am action of destruction on the known elements of the enemy;
- b) neutralization of the most advanced enemy airports;
- c) protection of fighters on the columns involved, particularly with regard to the stage of their outlet from mountain passes;
- d) survey to the south (coming from Fom Tatahouine) and Southeast (coming from Ben Gardane).

9. - *Connections*: with the Italian commands: network radio and wire in place; with German commands: by the G.S. with German troops of the 1st Army.

10. - *The Army Tactical Command*: hill 715 (7 km. South-east Toujane).

11. - *Day X* will be further informed by preceding the date the conventional word "Capri."

The General Commander of the Army
GIOVANNI MESSE

REPORT HELD ON MARCH 10, 1943
BY MARSHAL KESSELRING
AT THE HEADQUARTERS ARMY GROUP AFRICA

Present:

- The General v. Arnim, interim commander of the Army Group Africa with his own Chief of G.S. General Gause;
- The General Mattioli, Head of G.S. Connection;
- The General Mancinelli, Head of G.S. of the Army;
- The General Bayerlein, Chief of G.S German troops to the 1st Army;
- The General Westphal, of the liaison with the Italian Supreme Command;
- The General Seidemann, Commander of the German Air Force Tunisia (*Fliegerfuehrer Afrika*).

Marshal Kesselring began by saying that the proposal made to shorten the front bringing it on line C. Serrat-Enfidaville was not accepted, neither by the Duce, nor the FUEHRER and that therefore the defense to the south must be made on the line of Mareth and on that the Schott that constitute a whole.

Then mentions the program the next starts in Tunisia, both as regards the transport of German units already flocked into Italy, both in reflecting the various supplies. Marshal Kesselring then asks if the predispositions of defense has been exploited the experience already made at El Alamein. Respond General Bayerlein which after referring to the general organization of the defensive front (line advanced, main line of defense, netting, minefields, anti-tank ditch, etc.) Notes that the position of Mareth is weak in the east, between the Gabes-Medenine roadway and the sea where the ground is more favorable for the use of mechanized and lacks an advanced line; therefore expresses the view that the enemy will try to break the front to the Far East with the tactic already applied at El Alamein namely attacking then the individual sections of the sector after violent concentration of artillery fire until the moment when it succeeds in creating a hole in which to launch its armored formations.

Marshal Kesselring noted that El Alamein teaches that when the enemy has occupied a position that is very difficult to dislodge and then the reaction must be immediate, with reserves appropriately located.

General Mancinelli note that remedying the natural weakness of the eastern sector will be created on the other side of the main location two major strongholds.

General v. Arnim believes that the very difficult position of Mareth can be circumvented by the west; notes that the central sector is very robust as it relies on surveys may arise, from which you can also line up to a certain point with artillery fire the eastern sector except for the extreme stretch towards the sea that therefore he also believes the weakness of the position.

Based on this appreciation of the defensive value of the position the General v. Arnim believes that we should draw from the mountainous area, the maximal amount of reserves for the benefit of the eastern sector.

General v. Arnim observes as well:

- That it would be highly beneficial to beat the enemy before launch the attack and that is on its starting point, but note that it takes a lot of ammunition that purpose vice versa in short supply;

- that takes many rapid-fire weapons to cope with the inevitable loss of material you will have during the battle;

- that night must ensure conveniently lighting of the north, namely not with big spot lights that the land would not adequately protect, but with a number of small units.

Marshal Kesselring noted that the stretch east-more exposed to the action of enemy tanks to prevent leaks-even bloody, must organize well the defense in depth with stop positions (*Riefelstellungen*) and with anti-tank weapons.

On this last point indicates the next allotment of 88 pieces from that recommended, however, to conceal with the greatest of care and to shoot only at the last moment. Marshal Kesselring also points out that it would be appropriate to withdraw from the front of the 15th armored division but notes that the decision must be carefully considered as it involves the replacement of that G.U. with new troops (coming from the center and west) in a very delicate and important, for them completely new.

Marshal Kesselring gave the floor to the Commander of the Luftwaffe (*Fliegerfuhrer* Seidemann) which notes that the situation of the air forces of the Axis is now much more favorable than it was at the time of the battle of El Alamein, both as the ratio of aircraft that is no longer so [s] advantageous as then, and as the competition that can now give the units deployed in Sicily which have scope for action much better than then deployed in Crete, and finally as the location and organization of the bases, security links with the front, the fuels situation (800 mc current availability. sufficient for 6 days). Also with regard to the situation of the Flak, the *Fliegerfuhrer* detect that the A/T batteries now they have better chance of intervention being equipped with a technical equipment that was missing on the Egyptian front.

Marshal Kesselring draws attention to the need for

during the enemy attack aviation be able to intervene at any time of night (illuminating the air field, bright signal actions at the front and so on.) especially by throwing illuminating flares throughout the area of deployment of enemy forces.

Marshal Kesselring, recalls the importance of the sector of Gafsa and asked if there have been set up extensive minefields. General v. Arnim replied that mined areas are limited to thin strips towards the front and along the access roads and that they lack a greater development of both mines, and the troops of the engineers to do them.

* * *

After the meeting, the General Mancinelli asks the General v. Arnim in what way it means the suggestion made by Marshal Kesselring that that is the line of Mareth and that of Schott form a unified whole. General v. Arnim states in that regard that according to him the 1st Army must fight for the decision on the line of Mareth and asks about that is communicated as soon as possible, preferably during the day, as the General Messe prefer attacking enemy and what it intends to conduct defensive battle.

As regards the illuminating of the west and the central front General v. Arnim gives as a general directive to leave in place the mobile troops and bring those non-mobile eastward at the portion most exposed for use through reinforcement of those already deployed therein.

SUPREME COMANDER. ARMY GROUP AFRIKA
TO COMANDANTE SUPERIORE

No 1094/43 -secret

Z.O., on March 13, 1943
6 copies, one sent by C./do by the Ger.

GUIDELINES FOR THE CONDUCT OF THE FIGHT IN POSITIONS OF MARETH.

I. - *Task*. The position of Mareth must be defended decisively with all the forces and means. It is particularly important that the forward position is defended as necessary until the end even if the forces partially deployed on the heights above were destroyed and that's because they are for the overall defense of decisive importance. And every man must understand well the need for a defense to the extreme.

II. - *Evaluation of the enemy*. It is likely that the enemy will attack with mass on both sides and north of the road Medenine - Mareth. The enemy will make his first attack with the infantry, probably after an adequately strong, very strong indeed fire artillery preparation and under the protection of artillery and tanks used as armored assault artillery. According to the experiences made so far you can count on night attacks of the enemy and with employment of a large amount of Smoke. The enemy will import first to raise our mines under the protection of darkness and fire, possibly eliminate with coups individual strongholds, and only later will introduce its armored forces in the struggle for the decisive breakthrough.

If the enemy is able to bring down the forward positions, this will probably be the first in the north of the location, and then lead the attack against the leading position in the same way, or will first try to overwhelm the other sectors of the line advanced in central and south with an episode from the north.

III. - *Conduct of the fight*.

1. -It is of decisive importance that we can annihilate the enemy infantry with the concentrated fire of all weapons when it is still in the waiting position. Faced with this task, and in view of the unfavorable situation of the ammunition and the little chance of success in similar conditions, the enemy counter batteries becomes a secondary issue; first of all you have to

limit time to attempt to destroy each battery enemy already identified, to cases exceptionally favorable.

It should also take this chance to unravel with this the location of his artillery.

2. - It must be absolutely assured of the possibility that our artillery can destroy a breakthrough both in the advanced line, is in the leading position, with the centralization of all the batteries can take action, including those of neighboring areas.

3. - We must by all means thwart the enemy's attempts to remove the mines with the help of darkness. The most effective means against this is a perfect barrier of all automatic weapons.

4. - You tend absolutely to the creation of an area of vast depth on both sides of Mareth. Here you have to keep prepared the bulk of reserves that are available to the 1st Army in a way that they can use or for an immediate counterattack, or to make a quick change to units too exhausted. Please immediately want to check this and if necessary, order as soon as they are removed from other reserves areas less endangered of all the front (possibly units full force of at least 1 Battalion.) And are invited waiting behind the sector most threatened the northern sector.

5. - You can count on the continued inflow of mine. The part of mines more powerful will also be the south and north of the main road as well as the area in depth of the north.

6. - Wrong locate all the anti-tank in the front lines of infantry. In each divisional sector - it provided that it is absolutely impassable for tanks -you must keep ready a mobile antitank group placed so that the preparation of enemy artillery fire could not destroy and who is able to stop a possible tank breakthrough made deep in the most important position. Command the Army, in part as described above, it will consider and possibly against tank forces which could take away from areas little or not threatened by these forces against tank wagons for use as additional ground in or around the area north of the main front.

IV. -What Reserves of Army Group against breaching outlined or occurred in the north of the Mareth front is provided the use of DAK It consists of the D.A.K. command and 21st and 10th Arm. Div.; assignment to D.A.K. other forces removed the 1st Army, to get a smooth conduct of action, it remains to be determined.

The Commanding General of D.A.K. He has been ordered to study the terrain appropriate for the positions waiting for his divisions. The date for the arrival in their waiting positions of the 10th and the 21st Arm. Div. It will be ordered in good time by the Army Group.

V. -The essential task for the use of all forces available is the anti-aircraft defense against air attacks by enemies high and low altitude during the day and as much as possible at night. Besides this, every anti-aircraft cannon must be able to be able to act with maximum efficiency against land forces. This applies primarily to the action against tank made with heavy anti-aircraft guns. Heavy batteries that *a priori* are not efficient for the antiaircraft action it should immediately employ as artillery and as antitank.

VI. - *Tasks of the Air Force:*

1. - reconnaissance, primarily photo reconnaissance of the enemy deployment.
2. - Hit the enemy air forces.
3. - direct Intervention in the ground fight primarily attacking marching columns groups and artillery.

VII. - I want that Italian soldiers, in most inexperienced to fight, will rapidly and in detail acquainted reminder of the points mentioned in Annex [omitted].

Knowing these points form according to experience to given in the prerequisite fighting the for successfully repel an attack in a big way.

Von ARNIM

LETTER FROM HITLER TO MUSSOLINI
of March 14, 1943

The Führer

Headquarters
on, March 14, 1943

DUCE,

with great pleasure I received your letter. The stabilization of the eastern front, as I hope, promises to be definitive, will allow me to have you personally meet perhaps very soon, provided that your health and your high occupations permit. I believe this is also essential, because the subjects are so vast and so important that you can not treat them exhaustively in short letters. Beyond that it responds to my inner desire to meet with you after passing one of the most serious crises in this war which required my nerves maximum effort. I believe, however, as already mentioned above, for it to be considered now with full awareness that the front in the East is welded both now and that the initiative already underway will pass definitively and completely from our part.

One of the most important issues at this time keep me busy, Duce, is primarily the maintenance and rightly-as you expressed in your letter - possibly also the expansion of your positions in North Africa. About this problem I would, Duce, briefly note the following:

1) Field Marshal Rommel was presented to me in the Headquarters. I have now returned to license the Field Marshal as to restore his health - what is needed urgently in the opinion of the doctors as well as he could judge myself.

In its place the Army General Arnim was instructed by me the command of Army Group Africa.

On the final version of the Command in Africa I would also confer with you, Duce himself. In any case, however, I ask you absolutely, Duce, that the license of Field Marshal Rommel and the current change in command in Africa to be kept secret at all costs. In Germany similar changes of command are not in any case ever disclosed or only several months

later. So in this case I believe that the disclosure of such information may constitute a serious threat that would cast everything to our disadvantage. Please therefore, Duce, it wants to give instructions to that effect to your commands. However posterity judge will want to Field Marshal Rommel, he was for his soldiers, of course, first of all those Germans, a commander well-liked in every command he held. It was and is at the opponent always a feared opponent.

The tragedy is that this man is one of my bravest officers and who has ability and audacity to an extraordinary degree, it failed for the problem of supplies that can be solved only with a maximum intensification of transport by sea.

2) I told the Field Marshal Rommel exactly what you, Duce, you wrote in your letter: you have to keep at all costs the bridgehead of Tunisia. Hence it must not be reduced to the space so that by that fact alone can take over a further worsening of the transport crisis, what would necessarily abandon it. Besides, I can not help but consider that all this is possible only if the problem of transport is really and deeply studied and solved. Here it is of crucial importance, Duce, not so much aviation, as the organization of the protection of convoys. The average overall transportation-including the Baltic -that Germany itself has to make involves a month approximately 4,000,000 to 4.5000000 tons. Of these, about 3-3.5 are transported along the Atlantic coast, in part through the English Channel to northern Norway. It would be completely impossible, given the current superiority of the British air force, provide for the safety of more than 4000 kilometers long route. with only the air force. If our monthly losses of tonnage and even totaled just 0.3%, this is only possible thanks to the perfect organization of the service of escorting convoys. And almost impossible to protect, for example, a steamer night attacks against aircraft, if the escort of the convoy is not perfectly organized and directed. I also totally inadequate figure transport of 80,000 tons per month, indicated by the Comando Supremo. The German army and, respectively, the armed forces in Norway, they receive from the sun in normal times about 140 to 150,000 tons per month. Therein do not include the extraordinary needs for the accommodation of the coastal fortifications, stocks of ammunition, food, fodder, etc.

The task of carrying through the channel of Sicily 150,000 tons or even 200,000 tons is undoubtedly much simpler than those that have been imposed -to facing an opponent that substantially exceeds the sea and in the air which, with its island, It is from our coast, at its closest, just 39 km. We transport only from Narvik or from Lulea 6 to 7 million tons of ferrous minerals

a year towards our German ports although the Baltic continually threatened by Russian submarines and even aircraft. All these issues are resolved, Duce, only by virtue of a perfect organization of the escort of convoys. German ships lookout and spare continually break down the attacking aircraft. Typically what is important in securing a shipping against torpedo bombers, is to have escort ships with personnel well equipped and well trained. *The answer to this question, Duce, depends the fate of your possessions in North Africa, and with it a great premise for us to end this war successfully.* Because if this issue is resolved, the German soldiers will certainly fight well and if necessary to die, however, in this way, these positions will not be preserved. Therefore I sent to you the most valiant naval officer that the German fleet has perhaps never possessed, the Admiral Doenitz to submit you proposals, Duce, that I beg you to look at just under one point of view and that is what it needs to resort to any suitable means to resolve this very important issue.

3) Based on the maps I submitted, the report made to me by Field Marshal Rommel and examination with some of my most capable G.S. officers I thought of all the possible solutions around the defensive line more favorable to be held at all costs against the British 8th Army.

The *advantage* of the location of the Mareth consists in the fact that in favorable circumstances it has with it the best preconditions for a our offensive action.

The *disadvantage* is that you can bypass to the west that undoubtedly exists. -as If the opponent is in the nature of the conduct of war by the British - breaks positions over a distance of 12-15 km wide front. near the coast after a very considerable artillery preparation, fulfilling at the same time an effective bypass from the west, this attack can lead to first loss of all non mobile units. In my opinion the location of Gabes and Chott will be kept at all costs as deep as a single body and the defense will have to be organized so as not to allow the less mobile forces of losing touch with the position of the Chott. The attempt of a bypass from the west will also have to be, and always it is just possible - broken promptly with actions mobile units. The whole defensive zone will, in my opinion, be settled by any means and held until the last man.

I have given orders, Duce, to Field Marshal Von [sic] Kesselring -in addition to the reorganization of the system of convoys -to throw himself temporarily with all the air forces on the British 8th Army. It will be provided to certainly send him all possible reinforcements.

If you succeed, Duce, to hold the position of Mareth or at least, in the extreme case, the position of the Chott and organize the system of convoys, no power in the world can throw us back from our positions in North Africa. To this end, I have already given instructions for after the start in the area of the 999th Brigade, the ten battalions of march and the armored division "Hermann Goering", is prepared for Africa also the 7th paratroopers Division. This is the best special unit of which Germany might have. A division whose resistance will be weakened in any way by American or British forces several times higher number if he has enough ammunition and of course the necessary provisions and has also secured the replacement for the weapons destroyed or lost. With great joy I saw that the second group of tanks type "Tiger" the first tanks are now already arrived in Tunisia. I will provide to cover the losses from the group had and will take all measures for the use of new weapons, especially heavy and effective. But all this is only a problem of transport. I believe the solution to this problem all the more important, Duce, as I fear that the opponent will start simultaneously with the attack on the British 8th Army - a attack that must be considered as the next -and with the 1st Anglo-American Army towards Sfax. This is also why I think it necessary to place mobile armored units so they can be used as needed. But as a last line of defense against the British 8th Army may be considered only the position of Chott supported by the mountains. In summary, therefore, I would say, Duce, who must defend to the utmost the possibilities, the position of the Mareth while that of Chott will be held at all costs. And if we can fix the issue of supplies, I have no doubt that sooner or later the North African adventure of the British and the Americans will be revealed as a mistake of the most serious consequences.

The Admiral Doenitz I submit now, Duce, some proposals that I discussed extensively with him and that in his opinion and also my belief are designed to solve the transportation problem. But here we lose every day that will perhaps become irreparable harm. Everything, Duce, who is in my forces will be sent by any means to the aid of this front.

Everything else I would like to possibly discuss with you personally, Duce. I think I can, the last ten days of the month, as long as circumstances permit even to you, to establish a meeting that really wish with all my heart. I'm happy for the fact that the foreign minister could at least tell me that your appearance is good again. I am also convinced that dedication to an ideal, lasting for many years, but that is connected with many thoughts and waste of nerves will not be felt slowly in the physical. Maybe it will be good for you if even for a

couple of days you can get out of your atmosphere and a joy for me-after many months of continuous wanderings in the horrible Russian front - see again Salzburg in a country that for us Germans is with its buildings and with all his art a synthesis of the Latin and the Germanic.

In the meanwhile, Duce, I greet you cordially with faithful camaraderie to you.

F. TO HITLER

1st ARMY COMMAND
OPERATIONS OFFICE

No. 1686 / Op. Of prot.

P.M. 11, on March 13, 1943-XXI

Subject: 1st Army (Follows n. 159 /Op. 8 February 1943).

Excellence Chief of G.S. General

Military Post 21.

About a month after the previous report I consider it appropriate to report back on the situation of the army to provide a picture as possible accurate and realistic level of efficiency reached on the eve of the expected enemy attack and propose what remains to be done, and It will be made, if they are made available means and whether there will be time, to further raise the stamina of the army itself.

1. -The Forces.

A) Italian Forces.

The arrival of the first units complements has allowed, in general, to eliminate much of the numerical deficiencies in the units of various weapons. Also it allowed to complete, almost, for the repatriation of the soldiers with turnover over 36 months of service in the colony. Soon, continuing the arrival of accessories at the same pace so far below, and if the situation permits; They will be alternated new contingents, gradually lowering a few months the period of stay in the colony.

The measure has had a significant favorable reflection on the moral of that mass of soldiers who considered the ordered suspension of the previous rules (return after 24 months of colony) as prejudicing his right acquired. To prevent the reformation of this dangerous mentality I have deliberately avoided to issue new rules on the subject and proceed to return to block when it already had in place the accessories, you can make the replacement without causing crisis of efficiency in departments.

It is made through dismissals and contraction of units, some uniformity in the constitution of the GU which seriously affected the heterogeneous origin of the elements, battalions

and groups, waves were formed under the pressure of the notes special needs. Continuing to live within the same division such units, at least in their majority, though obviously earn, day by day, in uniformity and cohesion until, perhaps in a near future, the original differentiation will not produce more effect than to a commendable spirit of emulation.

About unit complements so far I have come to this: a sufficient training - a little knowledge of weapons - the complete ignorance of anti-tank weapons - little good, from the quality point of view, the grading officers and NCOs.

The foregoing answers the situation achieved at the divisions "Trieste", "Spezia" and "Pistoia". Unlike the case of the "GG.FF.", the "Centauro" and Sahara Grouping.

It has not yet been able to deal with the transformation of the "GG.FF." dividing "Bersaglieri Africa" is because in the meantime it had to employ 7th Bersaglieri Regt. in another sector, where it is still held back by operational needs not otherwise confront, either because they are not yet at the Bersaglieri Battalion (actual and complements) announced. The transformation will be accomplished as soon as possible, with a definite advantage of the efficiency of this division employed in a very sensitive area of the line.

The "Centauro" is still far from having taken on the appearance of organic armored division. It could recover a Bersaglieri Battalion already used on the front of the 5th Army, came from Italy two groups of artillery and minor units. I do not think however that, on the basis of the allocation announced, you can never talk about the reconstitution of an armored division real, given that the tanks will be sent in a very limited extent. In any case, may not be the M/41 tanks to attribute value of modern armored unit..

I think that would be very appropriate for the "Centauro" could at least come quickly to be a motorized division whose basic elements would be the 5th Bersaglieri Regiment, 131st Artillery Regiment, the 132nd antitank regiment (made at the time with tankers units remaining without tanks), a tank battalion and all that was possible to assign self-propelled.

The transformation of the Sahara Grouping into a Infantry Division will be quickly performed as soon as it reached the 52nd special brigade, in the process of arrival.

It has implemented some improvements in the management, pushing many elements hopelessly inept or tired or demoralized. I pointed out how recalled officers abounded from the reserve, outside the management of the mobilization role, in places totally inadequate on their performance. It was the inevitable legacy of the territorial and sedentary of the military structure of Libya.

I proceeded and provided and the gradual return to normality. Please have it in the future is avoided assigning officers of these categories. In general then frameworks should be physically

chosen to stand the test of war, compounded from the colonial era.

The measures adopted, the period spent in a healthy work, confidence gradually placed in positions strengthened through the daily work, the constant care of the commanders have achieved significant improvement in the morale of the troops.

On this path we will continue tirelessly to achieve any possible further elevation of the fighting spirit.

B) *German Forces* (see. summary annex no. 1).

A big crowd of complements and infantry weapons allowed the recovery and completion of some infantry units, while there occurs a corresponding increase in general efficiency of the artillery for influx of deficit material.

The tankers, tanks and armored cars, far from increasing, have declined considerably since the latest report, as a result of losses incurred in recent operations. The 15th Arm. Div. in fact (only available to the 1st Army) has 40 tanks, while it was 66 on February 1st. Not much brighter to me is the situation in the other two divisions, 10th and 21st, on which competition can possibly rely Army in case of need.

Even in German units, officers and men, the spirit is significantly higher than it was in the days immediately following the withdrawal.

2. -The commands.

Dissolving the reservation made in the previous report I am pleased to say that the commands, commanders and personnel, are characterized by momentum and application so the units can reach that degree of efficiency and the importance of future test needs.

I mentioned in the previous report to a state of moral detected in some general bypassed in the advance. Since then the generals themselves were seen climbing a again, while remaining committed to them the honor and the burden of command of a large unit deployed.

3. -The materials.

I do not intend to repeat special considerations on the materials available to the Army. I only wish to say once again that, while lacking adequate armored forces that allow conduct active defense, based essentially on the counterattack, also it laments the lack of a mass of modern artillery and, yet, an adequate supply of ammunition.

In the annexes tables Nos. 2 and 3 lists the Italian and German weapons deployed and ammunition. They show, for the Italian side, the extreme poverty of medium-caliber and above medium

modern gauges, which results in poor and late possibility of action at a distance, actions which are contrary to the normal medium artillery. It is also (always on the Italian side) that own these guns (for which precisely because of the limited number multiply requests for fire and do not work compensations overall on the line) ammunition is very poorly.

In the German situation best quality for the guns, but worrying situation in the field of ammunition: currently about 1 *unfoc* at the units, which will reach about 2 *unfoc* in a few days, using up all the resources of Tunisia.

If it is not quickly remedied, by any means, in such a state of things, it would face a serious crisis of artillery (German and medium-caliber Italian) as early as the second day of the battle, while the crisis would extend gradually to become general. In the following days, as it is possible to extend a defense in such conditions. I remember that the battle of Alamein lasted for a full 10 days, with unabated violence by British artillery and that the rich use of unconventional munitions responds to the tradition of the tactical adversary.

I must therefore renew an urgent appeal to:

- new assignments and immediate influx of modern long-range artillery (see adjoining sheet from the Artillery Command of the Army);
- immediate turnout of ammunition, especially medium caliber in order to arrive in Tunisia, more than 5-6 *unfoc*;
- to promote the flow of ammunition for the German artillery.

I could not ask for a troop strength indefinitely if I had enough ammunition for their weapons.

In terms of general inferiority in which the Army needs and is ready to take the fight only two material elements can be folded in our favor: the strengthening of the positions and the use of the relentless fire. The first provides the Army with arms of all its soldiers and the use of materials that have so far been provided with sufficient rate. For the second must have ammunition.

In the field of motor vehicles (see table annex no. 4), realizing that it could hardly be done promptly a great effort to appreciably change the existing situation, perceive, the need to:

- solicit sending spare parts to accelerate the disposal of the huge amount of repair work;
- solicit sending tractors for artillery, to return to this weapon that minimum of tactical mobility that allows a proper use.

4. -The defensive position.

A) *The advanced position* (See map annexed n. 5) (*).

And for some days directly invested by the enemy line. The occupation can be defined quite strong, in general, in relation to the task that has been entrusted to play for time corresponding to the natural characteristics of the land position is rather weak in his flat northern stretch. Minefields, elements of cross-linked strongholds deep underground, sufficient deployment of artillery and competition of artillery fire in the deployed position of strength gives it enough strength to force the opponent to deploy a strong force in turn to attack.

I must remember, however, that, at least so far, the function of the advanced position, is not resistance to the bitter end, importing indeed recover, for the defense in depth of the rear standing position of resistance, the greater part of the forces employed in it.

Proceed ceaselessly to improve the preparation defensive to maximize the retarding action entrusted to it.

B) *The location of Mareth.*

A truly enormous amount of labor and the use of almost the entire material of reinforcement provided conferred on the position of resistance remarkable consistency. But this is a shallow position, as is the rest imposed by the availability of forces, insufficient for a more staggering.

While the location is seemingly placed at the front (minefields, barbed wire, anti-tank ditch, the backbone of the first group), they have dealt with now work to ensure the defense of a greater depth, especially in the areas that appear most vulnerable to action Combined infantry and tanks (straddling the largest roadway). It also is preparing the construction of cross compartments that enable them to respond to inevitable fluctuations during battles.

Finally they are placing the very few available reserves in order to form the backbone of a defensive line retracted, while keeping them in a condition to be employed elsewhere, to intervene in the areas compromises or to a counter.

For all this work, which will be conducted tirelessly, we need reinforcement materials, mines and wire, as well as the quantities already required and assigned. Please grant and provide urgent sending of materials required for the above.

(*) omitted

I think it right to say that despite having done everything possible to achieve the maximum return over time, with the forces and means available, the position can not be held today strong enough to hold out for a very action of attrition conducted by forces and means overwhelming. Do not allow either the scale quantitative and especially qualitative weapons deployed, nor the availability of ammunition, nor the extent of the reserves.

Under this last point of view I refer once again to the battle of Alamein, he fought against the same British 8th Army that now faces us: the *Panzerarmee* then available, as a reserve, 2 Germany armored divisions and one motorized division and the same number Italian. Today the 1st Army has only one German armored division with thirty tanks efficient and a few battalions. The contest's reserves Army Group Command is subject to the overall situation of the whole front of Tunisia. The area of Gafsa can also determine, within the same of the army, a situation which absorb much of the low reserve Army.

C) The south west.

The Sahara Grouping has sided between Tamezred and Tebaga, making huge defensive works (minefields, barbed wire, anti-tank ditch).

However, this is a weak framework intended to frame other forces to assist the flow in case of actual threat. For the moment it is not possible to predict how and where to draw reserves for this purpose.

Next to the defensive position, about 30 km., Keeps a veil of forces exploring, in contact with enemy forces similar.

From the evidence so far collected on the characteristics of the soil it seems to be able to conclude that on this front could hardly gravitate to the attack, with the bulk of the enemy forces. It considered, however, that a rate, the extent of at least one armored division, could operating there without too much difficulty. The weight of such an attack would be enough to overwhelm the defense prepared if it were possible to strengthen it with adequate reserves, especially artillery.

D) The west front.

While a group of mobile forces preserves the occupation of Gafsa until he is forced to retreat under the pressure of superior forces, the complex forces that depend on the command of the division "Centauro" is being organized in defense on the height of the pass of El Guettar. Were performed excavation, placement of mines, reticulated, elements of anti-tank ditch. It is also here more like a cover, designed especially to give time for the influx of reserves, in the event of a real threat of attack with overwhelming force.

And even here so far it lacks the ability to prepare a adequate sectoral reserve, while the eccentricity of the sector, with respect to the center of gravity of the army, and the material distance of other fronts, make long and complex turnout of reserves from other sectors .

5. -The line of Chotts.

About 2000 workers have brought well under the digging of the ditch anti-tank, predicted for a development of about 113 km.

It was not and is not possible to proceed with the placement of mines and construction of fences, because the totality of means available has been and will still be dedicated to the strengthening of the defensive positions of the position of Mareth.

Since there is now a close contact with the opponent the withdraw operation by the Mareth Chotts would present in full all the difficulties highlighted in the previous report and could perhaps be attempted with any chance of success only if the Army were able to resort to a cover rearguard far more honorable than that achievable with only mobile forces at his disposal.

6. -Conclusion.

A considerable effort has been made and will continue with the same relentless pace to boost up to the extent possible the position assigned to the defense of the Army and maximize the efficiency of material and moral of the army itself.

Nonetheless, the degree of preparation is not to allow optimistic forecasts, on the eve of the attack to be launched by the modern and fierce British 8th Army, with the assistance of other Anglo-American forces acting on the western front. If you can add even a single success in the decisive battle that is about to be initiated must not leave anything undone because it is true. At the present time this increased probability can be achieved only with the immediate start-up, with exceptional means (without interrupting the flow of supplies provided), modern artillery and abundant ammunition and German tanks.

He may then the consciousness of anything having neglected to bend to take up arms in our favor.

The General Commander of the Army
G. MESSE

Follows: Attached table n. 1 to the sheet 1686 / Op. of March 13, 1943-XXI.

OF EFFICIENCY OF THE GERMAN MAJOR UNITS ON 8 March 1943-XXI																							
Unit	Co. Tank	Co. Inf	Co. A/T	Co. A/A	Bty. Lt	Bty. Hvy	Tank	Armored Car	protected trucks to transport troops	A/T Med	A/T Hvy	Inf. Gun	Mortar	A/T Rifle	MG. A/A. 40 mm	88/35	88/41	Co. Tank	105 Gun	150Hwy	170 cannon	210 Motor	105 how
164th Light Div.	Organic	-	24	2	-	4	3	-	30	-	-	21	15	48	-	-	-	-	8	4	-	-	16
	Existing	-	16	-	-	2	-	5	8	1	3	43	-	-	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
90th Light Div.	Organic	-	24	2	1	4	2	-	-	-	2	16	18	48	12	-	-	-	8	-	-	-	16
	Existing	-	20	1	1	2	1	-	-	-	3	11	8	37	12	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	6
15th Arm. Div	Organic	8	12	2	3	6	3	166	24	44	10	6	39	40	-	-	-	-	4	8	-	-	24
	Existing	4	9	2	1	4	3	40	10	13	1	28	2	18	13	-	-	-	2	10	-	-	13
Army Artillery (Arko Afrika)	Organic	-	-	-	-	-	12	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	12	12	9	9	-
	Existing	-	-	-	-	-	9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	12	4	5	6	-
19th Flak Div	Organic	-	-	-	-	12	18	-	-	-	-	-	-	184	36	-	72	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Existing	-	-	-	-	12	18	-	-	-	-	-	-	171	12	-	51	25	-	-	-	-	-

Note: The 10th and 21st Armored Division employees for use by the Army Group have approximately the same efficiency of the 15th Armored Division

Note: The 10th and 21st Armored Division employees for use by the Army Group have approximately the same efficiency of the 15th Armored Division

Attached to the appendix table No 2/1686/ Op of March 13, 1943-XXI

WEAPONS DEPLOYED AND AMMUNITION SITUATION

OF THE 1ST ARMY ON March 13, 1943-XXI

	Unfoc at the depots of the Intendenza	Unfoc at the warehouses	Total Unfoc
	1.90	0.83	8.23
	0.90	0.62	3.52
	0.70	1.80	5.00
	0.30	0.20	3.80
	2.30	0.83	6.13
	0.10	0.16	3.26
	0.70	2.34	5.54
	0.80	0.79	3.49
	-	-	-
	-	-	-
	-	-	-
	0.80	2.47	5.27
	0.02	0.00	2.02
	0.10	0.67	2.77
	0.00	0.00	0.25
	0.60	0.00	2.20
	0.40	1.43	3.73
	3.10	0.74	5.84
	0.10	0.63	2.53
	0.30	0.76	2.86
	0.30	0.60	2.60
	0.00	0.00	1.10
	0.60	0.64	3.12
	0.90	2.80	5.70
	0.00	0.00	0.50
	4.00	0.75	5.55
	0.00	2.50	4.50
	2.20	2.69	6.79
	2.50	0.00	3.00
	0.00	0.00	0.50
	5.20	4.68	11.68
	0.20	1.24	3.34
	0.00	0.00	1.90
	0.10	0.02	1.32
	1.60	0.00	3.40
	0.00	0.00	1.10
	0.00	0.00	0.72
	0.00	0.85	2.31
	0.00	16.80	18.82

Attached to the appendix table No 3/1686/ Op of March 13, 1943-XXI

AMMUNITION SITUATION GERMAN UNITS

Type of Ammunition	Unfoc in the M.U.				Unfoc Ger. Units for 1st & 5th Army	Unfoc dep. Ger Gables 1st Army
	90th Lt	164th Lt	15th Arm.	Army Art		
For infantry	1.4	0.9	0.8		0.7	0.3
A/T and A/A	1.4	0.8	0.8	0.72	0.1	0.2
A/T Rifle	2.7	9.3	0.8		2.8	1.1
A/T 38 antitank 50mm	1.2	0.53	0.8		0.1	0.2
A/T 40 antitank 75mm	2.7	1.1	0.8		0.5	0.96
Tank gun 50mm	-		1		2.8	1.76
Tank gun L 60	-		1		0.18	0.31
Tank gun 65 mm	-		1		2.16	0.47
Tank gun L 43	-		1		2.16	0.68
Antitank 36 of 76.2 mm	2.2		0.9		0.62	0.92
anti-aircraft of 88/35	0.9	1.8	0.75		1.66	1.34
anti-aircraft of 88/41	-				2	0.76
heavy mortar 34	1.1	0.8	0.8			0.41
Special Mortar 41 of 15 mm.	1.5			1.42	0.41	
Special Mortar 42 of 210 mm.	-			2.52		
Special Mortar 42 of 310 mm.	-					
heavy mortar 28/32/41	-					
light gun for Inf. 18	1.6	2.5	0.8		4	0.4
Mountain Gun 15	1.8	1				0
Heavy infantry Cannon 33	-		0.8		1.1	0.5
Light Field Howitzer 18	1.5	1.8	0.7		0.4	0.77
Canon 18 of 100mm.	1.1		0.4	0.56		0.1
Howitzer heavy field	1.3		0.7		0.2	0.5
Cannon on aff. mort 170 mm	-			0.31		
Mortar 18 of 210 mm	-			1.21		
A/T of 37mm	-					
A/T of 40 mm.	-					
A/T of 57 mm	-					
guns Pb of 87.6 mm.	-			0.25	0.3	1.5

Follows: Attached table n. 4 to the sheet 1686 / 0p. of March 13, 1943-XXI.
SUMMARY OF VEHICLES IN THE 1ST ARMY the March 5 XXI

Agencies	Cars Vehicles		Heavy Trucks		Light and Medium Trucks		various Vehicles		Trailers		Motorized transport	
	Efficient	Ineffic	Efficient	Ineffic	Efficient	Ineffic	Efficient	Ineffic	Efficient	Ineffic	Efficient	Ineffic
Troops	226	262	501	383	823	437	449	103	76	7	→	→
Intendenza												
a) in the Corp												
Truck Group	-	-	362	163	-	-	-	-	-	-		
b) Military	10	15	40	20	220	59	184	50	42	18		
c) Civilian	-	-	187	74	-	-	-	-	144	73		
TOTALS	236	277	1090	640	1043	496	633	153	262	98	1300	600

In this calculation does not include vehicles ceded to the Intendenza Tunisia, namely, about 60 cars; heavy trucks 340 efficient - 127 inefficient; trailers, efficient 37 - 10 inefficient, various vehicles, efficient 102 - 50 inefficient, efficient civil tankers 74 - inefficient 85; civilian cars, efficient 462 - 280 inefficient civil trailers, efficient 232 - 124 inefficient; vehicles, efficient 100 - inefficient 50

Follows: Attached table n. 5 to the sheet 1686 / Op. of March 13, 1943-XXI.

SUMMARY OF VEHICLES IN ARMY ON March 5 XXI

Enty	Motorcycle	Tricycle	cars	Staff Car	vans	carts	Lt. Truck	Hv. Truck	Ambulance	Refrig. Truck	tankers	Bus	wrecker	workshop	tractor	Trailers	P.B.	Requisti Franc.	Total
1st Army	59	6	2	88	19	5	30	22	2	1	0	0	14	5	1	11	3	-	268
	16	0	0	34	6	8	14	8	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	-	89
Artillery	103	2	5	15	1	13	129	62	-	-	1	-	10	9	21	38	12	1	421
	37	3	4	16	1	10	50	38	-	-	0	-	3	2	6	4	6	0	180
Intendenza	149	14	6	48	19	3	278	264	86	12	15	1	17	35	46	139	13	4	1,149
	66	8	6	29	10	7	150	153	20	5	10	3	3	3	18	65	4	1	561
Engineer Comd.	86	50	5	48	6	14	223	132	-	-	4	0	59	8	2	71	33	-	741
	27	9	12	43	10	11	149	109	-	-	4	2	6	0	5	4	44	-	435
XX Corp	72	1	6	50	5	7	334	215	1	1	7	-	32	32	75	13	55	-	906
	12	0	0	15	8	8	93	87	0	0	1	8	2	15	2	6	-	-	257
XXI Corp	263	274	4	45	4	65	249	240	1	2	0	-	18	29	72	18	14	-	1298
	72	31	1	27	4	38	130	86	1	1	2	-	0	1	19	0	10	-	423
Sahara Group	8	1	-	14	-	-	47	101	2	-	5	-	-	-	15	-	6	-	199
	2	0	-	4	-	-	15	40	0	-	2	-	-	-	-	7	-	5	75
Centauro Div.	221	35	2	23	12	21	224	109	3	-	-	1	4	21	20	29	9	-	734
	50	3	2	7	4	2	25	14	1	-	-	0	0	3	1	2	4	-	118
CC.RR	23	-	3	20	7	1	27	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	86
	8	-	0	4	3	0	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	19
Total	984	383	3	351	75	129	1541	1148	95	16	32	2	154	139	252	310	147	5	5793
	290	54	5	179	46	84	628	536	22	6	20	6	20	11	71	78	80	1	2157

Attached to the sheet 1686 / op. of March 13, 1943-XXI.

ARTILLERY COMMAND 1st ARMY

No. 02- T / 332 prot. Op. secret.

P.M. The, March 10, 1943-XXI

Subject: Strengthening the deployment of artillery.

To command of the 1st Army.

Given the nature of war in the current situation and the current ground (character that is obviously quite different from that of the war in the sirticon desert and that allows and encourages the use of heavy artillery to ground) it is likely that the enemy will pour Online artillery even more powerful than it already has.

Please therefore this Command examine the possibility of implementing preventive measures on our part to not let too overtake in terms of quantity and quality of artillery.

It is true that the largest organization allowed by the defensive system can offset some of the less chance, but that only within a certain limit.

I therefore believe that it would be very useful to be able as soon as possible to have a greater number of heavy artillery modern type (now reduced to a few pieces and worn); being to:

-Give a reinforcement of the artillery corps throw level and throw curved;

-secure to the Army a mass of artillery capable of giving more power and greater flexibility in our deployment.

Beyond that it would also agree to always keep our present deficiencies in anti-tank artillery effective against tanks enemies with more armor, sort of armor with cavity, against which to project A.P. They have minor effects.

be sent in units synthesis of:

- cannon of 149/40 or similar
- Howitzer of 210/22 or similar

} for the Army

- Howitzer from 149/19 or similar
- cannon 105 long-range
- or in their absence, cannons 90/53

}for the corps;

-cannon anti-modern mobile and a strong initial velocity possibly for the divisions. caliber from 75 to 90.

Major General Commander
PIETRO BELLETTI

MEETING VON ARNIM-MESSE
of March 18, 1943

Gen. von Arnim. Command Army Group responded in writing to the request for an authorization to decide on the withdrawal of troops from the forward position to prevent its annihilation. However, he specifies that the two positions constitute a single set and are defended as a single whole.

Gen. Messe. The concept is unclear. The two positions have a different function.

The forward position has a function which in part has already been acquitted: compel the enemy to stand away from the position of strength.

From the position of strength it is not conceivable without the retreat instead that there is a overwhelming pressure, irresistible opponent.

Gen. von Arnim. This is clear. The forward position is to be occupied more subtly. It is a whole unit from which it withdraws without order of the commander of the army.

Be grateful, however, to be warned by phone if the events were to oblige to order the withdrawal of some element. From this it will depend on the decision on the use of the reserves of the Army Group.

Gen. Messe. Okay, unless it does not happen, as it did yesterday, that there are elements forced by events to fall back, without being able to wait for the order of the Command of Army.

Gen. von Arnim. Of course: this is not an eviction according to the program.

Gen. Messe. There is no program of clearance. It clears just behind the irresistible pressure of the opponent.

Gen. von Arnim. We have to have clear differentiation between exploration offensive, even stronger, and an actual attack. We are opposed, of course, to both.

Gen. Messe. Yes, but it must also take into account that the exploration you can easily switch to the attack.

In the same advanced line has already been made a distinction between the function of the advanced position in the areas of "GG.FF." and "Trieste" and that the position advanced in the areas of the 90th, the "Spezia" and "Pistoia". The latter has a greater value. The assessment comes from different soil conditions, the ability to strengthen the positions, the amplitude of the sectors.

At this time the advanced employment of the "GG.FF." no longer exists. The "Trieste" takes all its positions with the exception of the left has withdrew in line with the deployment of the "GG.FF.."

Gen. von Arnim. Do you believe that the position occupied by the "Trieste" can oppose a major attack?

...

Gen. Messe. No. And a position occupied yesterday.

...

Gen. von Arnim. It is very satisfying to see that the very strong fire of enemy artillery has produced few casualties. This is very favorable, as the troops are convinced of the limited effectiveness of the artillery and did some training. Do you believe that the individual soldier has become aware of this?

Gen. Messe. Only one test is not enough. Training for war is long.

We must distinguish two shares of troops to fight a new war that knows only by hearsay: this needs to workout.

The other is that which comes from Alamein: but still has the feeling of the superiority of English.

This small success, with the finding of the only damage caused by artillery, will significantly improve their psychology.

They will do two or three of these successes to convince that the English can not easily pass.

Gen. Von Arnim. All commanders must do work persuasive to the soldier in this regard.

Gen. Messe. Just today I spoke to commanders of Corps, and

...

Yesterday I spoke to the commander of the "Trieste". It is a work of all times.

To make good the moral reflections that might have the scarcity of ammunition I have given orders to explain that if we do not do it because we want to counter-battery fire at the moment and will forward infantry tanks. But it certainly would be a relief to be able to do some counter-battery.

Gen. von Arnim. Try to make the counter-battery with aviation to save ammunition.

Gen. Messe. He announces that tonight will be brought into the line the Grenadiers Regiment of Africa.

Gen. von Arnim. Asked whether it is possible to resume, with a coup, hill 16 for being able to use as a base for counterattacks.

Gen. Messe. You will be seen to do so.

Gen. von Arnim. Asked if the action is expected of the 15th Armored Division in the field of the 90th division.

Gen. Messe. Already he has been ordained to the division commander to perform reconnaissance and prepare the necessary application.

Gen. von Arnim. This would be done only when the enemy attacked with tanks. Against infantry we should not waste the few tanks that we have.

Gen. Messe. Agree. Precisely why were they employing tanks to restore the situation to the left of the position.

Gen. von Arnim. Since the success of a counter is increased

if immediate, you can not carry the infantry division, using tanks and pioneers with the infantry that is already in place.

Gen. Messe. I'm always a little reluctant to consume armored troops of reserve if there is really a need. Until commanders in place are able to do so they should act with their forces.

Gen. Messe. He asks where is the location of the 21st Armored Division.

Gen. von Arnim. It depends on what happens in Gafsa. Tonight will go behind the 15th.

Gen. Messe. It would be good that the Commander D.A.K. He was left here to coordinate everything.

Gen. von Arnim. The entire 5th Army, with the exception of Gen. Sogno, has no Corp commanders. However, giving the 21st Armored Division will also be given to the command of the DAK

Gen. Messe. We need to clarify the concept of control over the forces that runs in the units in the rear to draw workers. It would wish that the control of Italian troops had left to the Italian Commander.

The Superintendency depends on Group Army Command only with regard to distribution of materials, or at least the technical operation.

The rest is discipline.

It does not intend to give up the right to be able to decide how it should and can work the Superintendency; I agree that it is necessary to lighten, but it is the army that has to decide in this field.

Gen. von Arnim. He asks only to help him solve a problem:

there are 350,000 living with the mess and only 70,000 fighters.

Gen. Messe. It is a common phenomenon to all wars. It will in every way to address them.

Gen. von Arnim. It will be necessary to use less of their personnel as laborers.

Gen. Messe. I'm already looking into the issue.

MEETING VON ARNIM-MESSE
of March 24, 1943

Present at the meeting:

General Mancinelli, Chief of the G.S. of the army,

General Bayerlein, Chief of the G.S. German of the army,

General Gause, Chief of the G.S. Command of the Army Group.

Gen. Messe. In the area of the "GG.FF." div. the situation has been restored to the previous; we now occupy positions we occupied before the attack.

Von Arnim. Takes this opportunity to express his recognition to the skills and the courage shown by all in this fight that has been a real surprise for the English.

Gen. Messe. This was partly also recognized by the enemy in its newsletter. Credit for this success goes to the Italian troops and German troops. Italian troops who have withstood the furious attacks and the bombing of the enemy, limiting penetration. German troops the greatest merit of having restored the line with their counterattacks.

Von Arnim. It is said particularly pleased that the success of the counterattack was due mainly to the fact that the 15th Armored Division was used promptly.

Gen. Messe. Praises the attitude held by the 15th Arm. Div. and he is said to be happy to give the commander of the division the silver medal for military valor. He will personally deliver it. Other brave officers and soldiers will be decorated on the field, as well as those of the 90th Division in the days 16th and 17th has fought valiantly.

Von Arnim. Thanks and please tell him the number of rewards to the value that will be conferred on them to reciprocate.

Gen. Messe. It emphasizes that in this circumstance commands, commanders and soldiers acted harmoniously and well.

The situation that has come to be for the 'GG.FF. "after the fighting means that the sector is, as density of forces, weakened. Regardless of the heavy losses of all units, consider practically eliminated the Grenadiers Regiment of Africa, the X Battalion 8th Bersaglieri, the V Battalion of the 7th Bersaglieri and IX independent battalion.

So no matter what other losses, we must consider the decrease of these battalions.

Von Arnim. How many battalions you can now count on that sector?

Gen. Messe. Two Bersaglieri battalions, a battalion of the 90th,

GG.FF. two battalions, a battalion CC.NN. and now even the *Luftwaffe* battalion that has been ordered, however, remain in reserve. It is a total of 6 bns. but it should be noted that the GG.FF. battalions, have a force of 200 men each.

In the area of "Trieste" the situation remained unchanged. There were significant losses on the 16th and 17th produced by artillery and largely from the fire of automatic weapons. The 90th Division had withdrawn a battalion that is brought into the area of "GG.FF.. " Everything else has remained as it was. The division has taken its positions and has reinforced.

Von Arnim. He asked whether there was an exploration of the opponent, regardless of the attack itself.

Gen. Messe. He responds positively.

The sector of "Spezia" has been adjusted to remove the 164th Division (Gen. von Arnim notes that the 164th was withdrawn at the right time). Currently many were made two sectors: sector, "Spezia" in command of the division "Spezia" and D'Antoni sector, under the command of vice-commander of the division "Pistoia".

The sector "Spezia" has a Battalion. the 15th Arm. Div. (Elements stranded), two companies of the 125th and two companies of the 126th (respectively left and right of the battalion of the 15th) on the forward position.

Position of strength there are a total of two Battalion. because two other Battalion. with the command of the 125th Inf. Regt. were brought back tonight and kept ready to move.

D'Antoni in the sector there are about two Battalion. over the Battalion. "S. Marco". On the front it was required by the 164th Division there are now three Battalion. the "Pistoia" Div..

The 350th Infantry (formerly part of the Mannerini Grouping) went to the XXI Corps, also does not give too many concerns to the commander of the 164th which is to be left only his sector, which is the most delicate.

Von Arnim. He asks what is the objective of the enemy in that area.

Leut. Col. Revetria. He informs that it was contacted this morning by elements exploring opponents who reported our movements in the area west of Tamezred.

Gen. Messe. explains be the group exploring A. 220 that was sent to that area.

Von Arnim. He declares to know perfectly the situation in the area of 164th Div. He is having already spoken with the commander.

Gen. Messe. It refers to the order given by the Command Army Group to bring two Kettana Battalion. These two Battalion. with the command of regiment (125th) they had been already, since yesterday dropped to employ them both in the sector of the XX Corps, and in that of the 164th division in case of need.

Following the order given by the Army Group can be added to these duties also to traveling into Kettana. Their

distance allows you to do this. Asks if the Gen. von Arnim is of the same opinion or order that it be brought to certainly to Kettana.

Von Arnim. Your order was only meant to replenish one staggered in depth.

Gen. Messe. It clarifies that if they are brought to Kettana certainly must be considered lost for other tasks, while doing so they are always ready.

Von Arnim. He is satisfied.

Gen. Messe. It expresses the opinion that the situation of the 164th to be regarded as rather delicate.

Gen. Gause. He notes that there is another area in which the situation is delicate: Maknassy.

Gen. Messe. He knows what. Indeed it allowed because last night they were brought on that front two batteries taken from the front of the Army. Had he been more sure of the situation of the 164th could perhaps give a Battalion., But at the current state of affairs that was not possible. He declares that the 164th to help, always hoping that the enemy is still a few days on the Mareth, there are currently two ways: -in the case of absolute and urgent need - to transport in that sector the 15th Arm. Div. or transport to you the 125th infantry with some artillery group.

Feel about it also the opinion of the commander of the 164th. Meanwhile, he would like to know the opinion of the commander of the Army Group.

Von Arnim. The opinion of the 164th is that, along with the 21st Arm., Will hold for now. He would like to know the judgment of Gen. Messe on what the enemy will do in the coming days.

Gen. Messe. It expresses the opinion that the enemy gives priority to the sector west, stopping momentarily to Mareth. This of course is absolute and is not an evaluation of the elements of which it is held.

Von Arnim. His opinion is unanimous. The breakthrough of the Mareth would cost too expensive and the opponent then hopes to get around another area, especially since in this way would be more near Gabes.

It asks how long, in the opinion of Gen. Messe, need to avoid the danger of breaches of the line of Mareth.

Gen. Messe. It depends on what you have to do the troops of the line Mareth.

Von Arnim. How long can you keep this situation in the event that the 21st Div. It is brought in the area of Maknassy?

Gen. Messe. Not even 24 hours to be optimistic. The commander of the 164th in its Communication of 20:00 hours yesterday called for urgent sending of new reserves. You can not therefore think to take away.

Von Arnim. The situation is this: the 10th Arm. Div. has been immobilized in the middle sector; the 21st has been immobilized here (General Mancinelli observes: reduced to 40 tanks).

Then, to establish a reserve, it needs only come in the determination of fall back on the shorter line of *Chotts*.

The need to pull out the 21st considers the "last resort", as the 15th is supposed to protect the retreat.

Gen. Messe. He realizes the need of the Army Group. It should, however, consider all the consequences; if it is held closed to the west the Army does not replicate. Even now it is difficult. Since the vehicles are not enough need to do three trips. The enemy will give us time to make only one or at most two. You should still try to make sure that the enemy perceives as late as possible the movement.

If it lightens the position before performing resistance movement to the forward position covered there is a risk that once attacked the enemy can easily break through this and then find emptiness.

Otherwise we can have the hope that the enemy has a time of uncertainty that will seek to clarify with the exploration, which will impact therefore against the position of strength, which will force the enemy to a new deployment of artillery.

At first it may therefore take away 6 to 7 Battalions.

Von Arnim. If we start with the forward position will be easy the enemy noticing the movement.

Gen. Messe. He has only proposed two hypotheses. They will then be considered and each will be assessed the pros and cons. Meanwhile, he will like to know the mind of the commander of the Army Group in this regard.

Von Arnim. ... Exposes his concept ...

The remaining part of Mareth should hold until held Liebenstein.

Gen. Messe. The enemy can be surprised once but no more. You can not tie the movement to Liebenstein. If you realize you have the enemy in front of him only a crust breaks easily.

Von Arnim. Liebenstein must keep at all costs until we are at the line of Gabes. All movement must be completed in the next three nights running climb over.

Gen. Messe. It is not possible for the shortage of vehicles. Personnel can partially perform the movement on foot, but we must bear in mind the need to transport armament department, ammunition, other materials.

Von Arnim. The ammunition that are ahead they will shoot all.

Gen. Messe. This would be fine, but then you have to see what's behind.

Von Arnim. Then we'll talk about it. We must reduce the time as much as possible. Precisely so as not to become aware of the movement of the enemy, what does not work to the defense of the first line should be moved certainly on the third line.

Gen. Messe. However, do not touch anything of "GG.FF." and "Trieste".

Von Arnim. You might bring back something of the "Trieste"?

Gen. Messe. No. The forward position of the "Trieste" can not stand. The forward position can only hold up to Arram. Further north only has the task of observation. If we bring in that sector via the P.R. the enemy opened a corridor and passes easily.

Von Arnim. Then we take away the forward position.

Gen. Messe. But in that case the enemy realizes it. It can be seen to take away a battalion. It should be noted that the first movements you can start as early as tonight.

Leut. Col. Revetria. Promises the opportunity to bring back before the retreat real heavy artillery.

Gen. Messe. Objects that should leave plenty of artillery. Anything you can still pull. Based on the directives of the Army Group, the Army adapt its orders. However, it is clear that you can not start tonight.

It concludes that successive lines indicated by the Army Group had already been studied by the Army. The solutions are in agreement.

Von Arnim. It states that for the removal of the line of Gabes will then given orders.

Gen. Messe. He asks if the above is enforceable.

Von Arnim. Yes. The order is: start the retreat from the positions of Mareth positions of Gabes. When you believe you can start the movement?

Gen. Messe. Tomorrow evening. Meanwhile, tonight I will take away all that I can. The 15th Arm. Div. certainly. Perhaps the 125th and then we will see what else can be done. It will not lose a minute: it is in our interest.

Von Arnim. They must be given orders so that the enemy does not notice.

Gen. Messe. Will not be given written orders, nor telephone nor telegraph and telephone. Only verbal orders given to commanders personally.

THE BATTLE OF MARETH
AND OPERATION OF MARETH TO AKARIT
16-31 March 1943

Commander 1st Army
-General Staff -

Z.O., April 5, 1943

No 338/2205 of prot. Secret
Subject: Report.

To the Supreme Command
- by official means -

I send a comprehensive report on the Battle of Mareth and the withdraw from the line of Mareth to that of Akarit.

A copy was sent to S.I.E. that he had requested.

The General of the Army Commander
G. MESSE

TEXT OF THE REPORT

1st -The night on March 17, after artillery preparation for that violence, duration, number of batteries and ammunition, is reflected only in the battle of El Alamein last October, two-thirds of the British 8th Army began the attack on Mareth line. At the same time, a third of the enemy forces, for little easier ways of the desert, threatening to circumvention tip of our right, beyond the massive Matmata *jebel*, protected by a thin layer lying between Melab and Tebaga.

After six days of fierce fighting in the coastal sector, the enemy has not achieved that modest successes, in proportion to the means employed and paid the price in blood: the 1st Army, which has so far reacted with essentially continuous, ready, the lightning counter assault units in place and with the operation of the fire of his artillery, now he arises, for the first time, the picture of the battle on the floor of a counterattack of great unity. The German 15th Armored Division (however small, from the previous fighting in other Tunisian areas, the proportions of one third of its personnel) in conjunction with other Axis forces in the Mareth Line, on 22nd and 23 March at the base of the cuts enemy salient wedged between our lines.

This counterattack in style crushes any British ambition on the line of Mareth. The 8th Army, which undoubtedly underestimate the reactive ability of our troops (are prisoners who say) and the possibilities of resistance of the line, does not give up the fight: move the bulk of his workforce to reinforce units already in march against our south-western sector, turning into major action that the original plan was to only be concurrent. The attack was launched on the night of the 22nd by the armored vanguards of the UK first echelon: here the struggle becomes extremely hard, but our countermeasures, in perfect synchronization with the emergence of the English maneuver, are already in place: already flowed in site most of the 21th Armored Division, made available by the command the army group, while it is the movement of the 164th Infantry Division, withdrawn from services. With these and other forces that are gradually withdrawn from the line of Mareth, the situation in the southern sector is promptly tackled first, and then clearly dominated.

When, as part of a strategic situation that involves all the Axis forces in central and southern Tunisia, the first army is ordered to fall back, the commander intends to bring forward the first battle, which believes it can solve advantageously in this area, and proceed only after the retrograde motion. Received confirmation of the withdrawal start certainly, the army can deal with and perform difficult maneuvers, exactly prodigious, under the arrangements already in place, the reaction movement that continues to oppose the enemy attack which, by focusing on El Hamma, constitutes a future threat that must parry and is in fact a parade, leaving the enemy uncertain and perplexed, as a result also of previous victory on the line of Mareth, in front of which the enemy troops remained jokes and depleted of resources to the benefit of the mass encircling. They are not able to effectively counteract the uncoupling.

At March 31, with the return of the rear guard over the line of Akarit, after a brief stop on the line of El Hamma-Gabes, the maneuver is completed: the enemy records to its credit a modest gain in ground and catching a few thousand prisoners, I am taken with the weapon in his hand after firing the last cartridge; prisoners that a logistical situation less tense in transport would undoubtedly have reduced in number.

2nd - The 8th Army, which for 34 months the powers of England men, cannons, tanks and vehicles of all kinds, has suffered in the line of Mareth and subsequent maneuver a failure resounding, which did not mystery, in a veiled form, the British Prime Minister, and that in the most explicit form a *Times* correspondent summed up, *albeit attributing the merit, for propaganda purposes, Marshal*

Rommel (1): "Rommel will not be cut off, given that most of its troops has already passed the pass of Gabes. Hoping to capture the bulk of enemy forces has had to abandon. All that was possible to do it the roundup of fortified positions of little importance. I think this situation was caused by the reverses suffered by the 8th Army in counter-attack by Rommel last week. All this lets us down a lot, but also the possibilities for American troops, who could make the main attack on the enemy side, were not much better than ours."

Succinctly summarized the budget of an operation that returns to the honor and glory of the troops and command of the 1st Army, it seems useful to review the essential elements that have originated, developed, concluded this unquestionable success of our arms.

3rd -Towards February 15, with the return of the last of our rear guard behind the line of Mareth, the British pursuit, started at El Alamein on November 4 and persisted for more than 2,500 kilometers, is over. Our troops, making anywhere in front of the enemy and by containing attacks on the highlights of this gigantic epic, have written a page of history that will remain memorable. But it would be an illusion to hide this immense labor lasted for months has not acted deeply, as well as on material factors, even on the moral of our military potential. The command of the 1st Army, in starting its operation, it has the feeling clear and precise: it opens and is covered by all, with the greatest energy, throughout a period of intense work of material and moral reconstruction.

In this overview does not find the place a minute examination of the measures taken and quickly carried to term in the best way to strengthen our forces; suffice it to mention that you are given the maximum pulse with the replacement of those elements that exceeded 36 months in the colony, for the hardships suffered and the moral state depressed, they represented more a weakness than of strength; were completed, in men and equipment, numerous units, others were dissolved, others again; were replaced commanders also very high grade, although it gave excellent performance in the past, did not appear in conditions of physical and spirit to deal with such new evidence that approximated, even harsher than those spent; it is by all means-even closer together physically - commands to the troops; It tried, within its modest means granted, to improve the material conditions of the soldier; They were taken vigorously in hand and rearranged the services of stewardship; It was given back in full at the controls of large units their full tactical function - organic - logistics that was lost through control systems that can be implemented in foreign armies, are

undeniably be discarded in our army.

Soldiers, cadres, commands have to be warned that if, after the glorious but painful events passed, a new phase is beginning was, to which you could look, if not with the certainty of a sure win, some with quiet confidence.

The positions assigned to the 1st Army are known through an undeserved reputation of "desert Maginot"; this Maginot consisted essentially of thirty *bunkers* in the coastal plain, the main barrier to communications; naturally good positions in the mountain area, where a wide threshold of about 13 km offers absolutely no obstacle to the movement of armored forces.

French concept in the "desert Maginot" was to represent the first obstacle to the Italian forces in Libya, notoriously devoid of armor, to give time to a series of countermoves, the development of which had been built on the back of a dense positions road network; this, which undoubtedly offers possibilities counter attacks, has the purpose of defending a fundamental flaw: it flows into the area of Gabes, which is to be so close, the loss of which (as a result of the breakthrough line of Mareth) would put in crisis all the defense of part of her coastal area, across the mountainous area of south-western sector.

It should be added that the existence of a cordon hilly sloping to the sea in front of the fortified area puts it, in the coastal sector, in terms of being dominated by an enemy that is able to seize it.

All of these elements, considered as a whole, in one with the development of the line, too modest than the actual first armed, they would prefer the choice of positions more backward (Akarit) that, if enhanced with defensive structures pitched prepared long, they would undoubtedly have offered an environment of greater economy and better resistance.

The command of the army found a factual situation and accepted it as time and resources were no longer available to renew the defenses elsewhere accessory that had already been prepared. Took into account the strengths and weaknesses of the line, trying to assure depth, remove it from the domain of enemy, exerting forces in the various sectors, in relation to the inherent resilience and their likely developments of the maneuver on the enemy which, since mid-February, They had concrete elements of judgment.

In relation to these criteria was made by troops occupy substantial and organize a defense cordon hilly aforementioned constituting an advanced position, intended to force the enemy a first deployment and to contain the impetus of the first attack. It was given increment, in the coastal sector, the field fortification

(Barbed wire and minefields), they were assigned broader areas to large units of the mountainous area (where he was also ready subtraction of a division, as soon as the maneuver enemy had specified in any detail). For the defense of the south-western sector (threshold Tebaga- Melab) was picked up and reinforced, with what is available, the Sahara grouping, serving *a priori* a delicate situation in which it was thought to be able to parry (as in fact happened) with the maneuver of mobile reserves, of which the army did not have on their own, but they had been assured by the army group.

Superior was the deployment and the use of artillery that, helped by good locations and good observers, was to be a cornerstone of our resistance. Given the lower range, the smallest number of pieces, the limited ammunition in comparison with the artillery of the enemy, he had to give, in principle, to counter-battery, to concentrate the focus on the most important goals, measuring the number of strokes in connection with hazard of these objectives: the operation of the fire, prepared in every detail, has fully responded, in every phase of the battle, with the results of precision, power, timeliness of these, constitute the most obvious, if not essential, obstruction to enemy.

As part of the revival of any energy material and moral they were to touch up some of our infantry fighting methods that affirmed by everyone in theory, had gone losing war in the desert, where the pace of the fight was marked by the action of tanks of anti-tank, artillery, aviation. The infantry, for a long time ankylosed in tasks of resistance in place, not counterattacked more. To fill this gap, to give new life and honor our soldiers, the army command has waited with particular care, using every means, incitement to emulation, the repression to the premium earned: from the first contact with the enemy is purported the maid, the team, the squad and so react with counterassault and counterattack, in proportion to the offense enemy; This particular non-negligible amount when you think that the enemy attack that we were preparing to reject it had to be, in the initial rupture, led primarily by infantry, albeit powerfully supported, as is traditional canon that big armored units can not (punishment swift destruction) arranged facing positions in defense if before the infantry, artillery, wagons bearing and aviation have breached proportional to the mass flow of armor.

In mid-March our preparation, that far from being desirable, however, marked points of considerable advantage. Instead remained vast and frightening gaps: *lack of ammunition, poverty of vehicles, lack of reserves on their own, lowliness of weapons and means in every field, little support from the aviation, not to seem that major (1)*. But on the whole army, reborn from glorious hosts

valiant men who had fought at El Alamein, in Sirtica and Gebel, dredge up with new elements that absorbed the spirit of the veterans, many of purified waste that the evacuation of Tripoli had taken with him, now had its own style, its own soul he accepted the fight, fiercely determined to extend it to the extreme, of those positions that had been entrusted to the honor of our soldiers.

4th -A mid-February the British avant-garde that had unnecessarily, and indeed very feebly, chased our troops from Tripoli to Mareth, it stopped in view of our positions, starting with small actions of detail designed to gauge the performance of our lines .

From now on, with constant and methodical progression, as the logistical situation returns to normal operation, the enemy forces flock over the Libyan border and go to line up at the turn of the roadway Medenine - Mareth and north, shielding between the road and the mountains with defensive works and pitched with the observation of armored units on the front and on the side.

Infantry units, of modest consistency, probing our advanced line also straddles the Ksour *Jebel*, while the first units are emerging enemies in charge of establishing and protecting a forward base in the desert area, Ksar Rhilane, for feeding the column outflanking that should point to his time between Tebaga and Melab.

It is evident that the enemy strengthens, in the first half, the coastal sector, where it will be for the XXX Corps: infantry divisions 50th, 51st, the 2nd New Zealander, armored divisions the 1st and 7th, army corps and army , consisting essentially of three tank brigades bearing (1st, 23th, 24th) assigned to infantry divisions, Guards Brigade, assigned to use the 7th Armored Division, artillery regiments of small and medium caliber, lower shares of troops of the 4th division.

At the end of the first decade of March the XXX Corps has nearly completed the deployment of troops; not yet developed appears the deployment of services of this great unit but working at full capacity, particularly after the reopening of the port of Tripoli.

Slower, some deliberately late, is the influx of the X Corps that will surprise maneuver to the west of Ksour *Jabal*, against our southern deployment; so far have flowed between Ksar Rhilane and Foum Tatahouine the de Gaullist brigades of Le Clerc and Koenig with modest representatives of Greek refugees, supported by the 4th Light Brigade, which removed from the 7th Armored Division, now it acts as part of the X Corps.

But times tightening for X Corps; reconnaissance

Aerial directed on the likely routes of influx of this large unit already from March 13 detects intense traffic on the rolling north and south-*jebel* in Tripoli and on the tracks - Tatahouine Doutrat-Ksar Rhilane; March 16, the eve of the XXX army corps there is no longer doubt that an armored division (the 10th) is crossing the threshold of Bir Amir, 40 kilometers south-west of Fom Tatahouine, to go against our Southern sector which is roughly five stages is thus identified the X Corps, backed by an armored division and other forces (de Gaullist, Greek, Indian) equal to a robust Infantry Division.

The enemy hoped that this sudden threat in a very sensitive sector of our front lead us there to distract part of our reserves, to facilitate the mass of the main attack (XXX Corps) the task of breaking into the industry that it still considers decisive: the coastal .

As at 16 March, the enemy forces we faced could be summed up in the following table, which also includes the remaining forces over the Libyan border, but as the enemy can draw from to feed the battle in time:

FORCES 8th ARMY	Inf. Bn	A/T Guns	Art. Pieces	armored cars	Tanks
west line of the boarder	56	720	550	150	475
east line of the boarder	14	220	160	-	145
Total	70	940	710	150	620

The table, which reflects quite accurately, as confirmed in the course of the battle, the order of magnitude of the enemy forces, can not express as clearly the military potential that they represent as a product, as well as quantity, and quality factors moral (1).

It is known, and not worth repeating if too easy evaluations of the enemy there were already cost care during this war, the 8th Army is the most modern and equipped force that is given notice today in the various theaters of war in this War truly global.

The infantry with which England feeds the Middle East are the infantry of quality for physical, for training, for fighting spirit; their armament and their equipment are cutting edge and exceed in comparison any infantry in the world: no one today has a powerful weapon against the tank, large, numerous, mobile like that of the British infantry.

The British artillery, which has a very large extent the excellent piece of 87.6 model 1939 (exceeded only by the German 88), has wide availability of excellent medium calibers such as the 114 and 152;

It has plenty of means of observation armored of all kinds and has possibility of fast connections radio and wire.

British armored units, quality of materials, training, plenty of means, are on the level of the best armored forces of all modern armies.

As part of the connections, which are just as important modern army weapons, the 8th Army is in the foreground.

Each specialty of genius is richly equipped, meticulously trained, technically prepared to perform any task technical and tactical.

Leaders and personnel are tested and selected with severity on the battlefield and not riddled with cumbersome theories constructed in closed barely ambulatory speculation, outside the reality of combat. The heads are granted freedom equal to the responsibility and wealth of resources that are entrusted to them.

The logistical situation of the 8th Army, which has tens of thousands of vehicles, which has at its service fleets of ships and aircraft fleet, does not require spending of words.

Cooperation between the R.A.F. and surface forces can be a model for everyone: it is based on the abundance of aircraft and connecting, the practicality of the methods, tested in 34 months of effective cooperation, the spirit of sacrifice of the personnel of the RAF who does not mind the first lines to connect these with the planes in flight, on the uniqueness of command, the iron discipline.

5th - The design of maneuver enemy, which implicitly has said about his unit, aimed to repeat advantageously proven to El Alamein; Also here, as there, the 8th Army had to carry out two attacks: a main one in the coastal area, one competitor in the southern desert. The plan seemed logical as provided to the following facts:

- it was known to the British, through a tiny, precise documentation provided by the officers de Gaullist Tunisia, passed in their ranks, that the line of Mareth did not constitute formidable obstacle to the means of the British army;

- the breakthrough in Mareth, for the reasons previously mentioned, would place in very severe conditions our troops deployed across the board to the threshold desert; the loss of the close of Gabes would give green light to the British armored divisions for those maneuvers in depth that were costing the disaster of El Alamein (loss of coastal logistics centers, encirclement units not directly invested, etc.);

- the attack concurrent to our southern sector, as well as pose a serious threat to the inherent strength of the troops that were destined, was to dissociate to the extremes of the front

Our mobile reserves.

On the other hand the enemy had well believe that, after a withdrawal of 2,500 kilometers, our defense forces placed at Mareth, framed in a strategic situation that could not escape anyone, they would have opposed a mild resistance, encumbered as they were by many negative factors, but in this field the enemy had to record the most bitter disappointment.

When the forces of Montgomery, after six days of terrible struggle that has piled the English corpses in front of our cornerstones, which has destroyed units of the highest order as the *Guards* Brigade, as the battalions of the *Black Watch* and *Durham Light* divisions 50th and 51st, that has blown to smithereens 150 thank of the 23rd Armored Brigade support, which has thwarted the expenditure of over one hundred thousand rounds of artillery that swallowed half a million RAF bombs scattered on all lines and the immediate rear, they are looking disappointed look around the amazing successes promised but not permitted, they should give up the fight on this "hell" line Mareth to run after the mirage of a better solution to the wing west of our camp. Thus, since the evening of the 20th, the enemy command has distinct feeling that the line of Mareth not break and consequently accepts the idea of Freyberg, commander of the 2nd New Zealand Division, to move the bulk of the forces in the south-west transforming the concomitant attack on main attack is a last resort not without extraordinary consequences;

-must be set in motion the 1st Armored Division and the 2nd New Zealand Division with the 24th Tank brigade bearing, imposing mass of about 12 motorized battalions, 6 armored battalions, 150 artillery pieces and related services; such a movement, worked in contact with our positions, could not (and could not) escape our investigation, which was ready to seize the early basic change of attitude the British;

-the above forces, to reach the pass Tebaga -Melab not had available that hard of mountain passes, in the process of rehabilitation after our hasty interruptions; it was essential that the majority of them from the area of Medenine Fom Tatahouine would shift back to 100 kilometers, the threshold of Bir Amir, to go up to the pass of Tebaga, after a journey of other 150 km of varied terrain; movement already difficult if prepared, very difficult if originated from surrounding circumstances; to avoid being caught crisis logistics command of the 8th Army had to deplete the resources and equipment the forces that remained to face the line of Mareth, removing them every opportunity to make rapid and decisive action in battle.

It was really sum misfortune of not having a adequate mass per unit area, in direct dependence of the army, to hammer during

the hard and difficult journey this mass of forces that would come very impoverished and battered to the battle.

In any case, the army command, even without air mass, saw the opportunity to deal a serious blow to the forces of Montgomery, accepting battle to end in El Hamma to which flocked all armored units placed on his addition (divisions 15th and 21st, equal to a hundred tanks) and units that could steal the line Mareth (164th Division and other lesser shares). In this sense, the command of army moves proposal to command the armed group that was forced to not accept it, but rather to renew the order to retreat, in relation to the worsening of the situation in the west of Tunisia.

Indeed the British action plan was not limited to only use the 8th Army: pincers Montgomery (in Mareth-El Hamma) was part of the broader strategic plan entrusted to the Anglo-American forces of the 5th Army that since the day of the 16th had launched attacks ponderous pass of Halfaya (between Berda *Jebel* and bu Serra *Jebel*), the saddle of El Guettar (between Berda *Jebel* and Orbata *Jebel*) and in-Sened Maknassy, concentrating the main effort on the saddle of El Guettar, in the ambitious plan to swoop behind the 1st Army, committed from El Hamma to Mareth.

And we should remember here that in thwarting the broader strategic plan of Alexander greatly helped the valiant Italian Centauro division, commanded by a magnificent soldier of great heart, General Count Calvi di Bergolo, with limited means in front of the excessive power of the enemy, did wall on the cornerstones of El Guettar, accepting the unequal struggle in twelve days gory that alone are worth a whole epic.

6th - The overall conduct of the battle seems can get sufficient relief from the introductory summary and the preceding notes. It will be sufficient here to outline some characteristic moments, to refer to some local situations and the measures taken to address them, to the behavior of our units that come out of this fight with the honor and glory of the strong.

The beginning of the offensive enemy this time is not preceded, as in the past, by massive deployment of air forces: it is difficult to say if the RAF abstain from this first start of the battle to accumulate the forces and means to be employed in the culminating moments (as it happened and as they had said some prisoners) or for not revealing implicitly the beginning of the attack: the one and may have contributed the other cause; However, the attack was least expected by our troops of Mareth. In fact in the information bulletin of 16 March of the army command reads: "About the time of the enemy offensive is to be noted that while the XXX Corps has already tightened under advanced in the area and has probably completed its

preparation, movements are still going on within the X Corps; enemy action in the coastal sector is even now possible; West of the Ksour *Jebel* need a few more days. "

The reaction of our troops and our artillery is immediate: the *Guards Brigade* is counteracted and overwhelmed; just to the north the English 51st Infantry Division, favored by better soil conditions and employment lightest in our forward position, it remains, at the cost of bloody sacrifices, possess some element of our forward position; seeing in these factors (land-forces) likely best elements of success, the enemy, in the night on the 18th, focuses new attacks on our division *Giovani Fascisti* (Bersaglieri and CC.NN.) who fights with intrepid zeal; the enemy penetration is slow, losses are bloody on both sides, the British prisoners, who also benefited from a support of mammoth artillery, define the reaction of our artillery "terrible"; "Terrible" are also minefields to cross despite the use of the new equipment for the removal of mines (the "scorpion") and define sadly mistaken the British propaganda that makes them believe modest reaction of Italian troops "are fighting instead ferociously, beating British units unexpectedly. "

This is an unexpected new plea that during the battle has undoubtedly influenced the decisions of Montgomery and even radio London will take later in his comments: "*Rommel accepted the fight as maybe we did not expect,*" while the situation for the much-hyped before suddenly become "fluid": the adjective that poorly mask the British failures.

On 18th and 19th, the fight takes place in a minor key: the enemy is taking breath and leads to battle a new division: the 50th, supported by the 20th Armored Brigade; with this mass of forces he hopes, in a supreme effort, to break through the line of Mareth, to open the way for the armored divisions that so far committed moderately, and only for motorized brigades and the artillery.

On the night of the 20th a powerful new attack is launched in the area of *Giovani Fascisti* Division, while other enemy forces pressed a bit anywhere on the whole sector of the XX Corps; the RAF, which had so far done little activity, goes into action with all its equipment; from the front parallel of Chott there is no meter of land that does not receive a bomb; Combating Mareth breaks up into a thousand episodes: each enemy attack corresponds our counterattack; the losses are serious by both parties; dead and wounded cover the ground. The attack continues with equal violence in the night of the 21st: Bersaglieri, GG.FF. volunteers, German Menton regimental undergo extermination equal to those inflicted on the enemy who, after six days of fighting in this area, managed to undermine our position

of resistance on a front of approximately two kilometers to a depth of one kilometer and a half. On day 21st, the Germanic 15th Armored Division, which had been already approached the front, is placed in the employ of the XX Corps, because, in union with the troops GG.FF. which take magnificently all the other positions, lead, within the framework of the corps, an immediate counterattack which will be given the maximum competition of artillery.

This counterattack, which decides the fate of the battle on the Mareth, develops on the 22nd and 23rd at the very moment when the enemy is laboriously organizing tanks to pass through the stretch of the anti-tank ditch captured by the British 50th Division. The powerful concentrations of our artillery, the momentum of the tanks, together with that of our soldiers, have reason for an enemy, it must recognize, showing a tenacity and a persistence worthy of the stakes.

In the evening of the 22nd the enemy is defeated; on our old positions it is not more than a few small English units, which is fighting with desperate tenacity, while our soldiers are reoccupying, over the resistance line, the centers of the fire forward position.

Churchill, later, in the House of Commons, in inviting the British people to be desired by the easy optimism, give the announcement that "the bridgehead established at the cost of blood of the 8th Army into the enemy positions, was eliminated by the Germanic counterattacks".

The axis of the battle moves to the threshold between Melab and Tebaga. The vanguards of the X Corp, the evening of the 21st, have attested to the slopes of Kebili, 5 kilometers away from the positions of the Sahara group. These vanguards, in the night on the 22nd, trying to overwhelm the momentum of our units, some of which, invested in front and then infiltrated by tanks on the rear, are forced to give way, while our deployment to the wings of the pass holds tenaciously against repeated attacks of the infantry and enemy tanks. But the situation can be looked serenely in this area, to which he has already been sent the German 21st *Panzer Division*, and which is flowing toward the 164th German division, which ceded its positions to the *Pistoia* mountain division which in its time, has passed over part of its area adjacent to the Spezia: complex movements that to be presorted and were studied for a long time, they do not take place at a minimum inconvenience.

On the same day of the 22nd the counterattack of the 21st Armored contains the enemy momentum who recorded a modest gain in ground. Then enters the line of the 164th, while rush to battle even the 125th Infantry Regiment (Spezia) and other smaller Italian units; all these forces, as a whole, constitute the Liebenstein combat group which has initial task for the arrest of the enemy attack and subsequently reinforced with the German 15th Armored Division and the *Luftwaffe* battalion quickly

withdrawn from the coastal sector, will certainly go counterattack. Other forces could be withdrawn from the line of Mareth, where the enemy, as a result of displacements of forces prepared by us perceived exactly, he has lost all offensive capability. It prepares for this purpose the dropping of the 90th Division and other divisions of Italian part, proposing to command the armed group to accept battle in depth in the field of El Hamma, as previously mentioned.

You have been clarified above the reasons, besides the situation in the context of the 1st army, led the army group command to reject the Italian proposal and to renew the order for the planned withdrawal. While this was started, the night on the 27th, strong enemy armored units obtained success against the sector of the 164th division of Liebenstein and tried to exploit it in depth, but were promptly arrested at El Hamma (where it had been launched infantry and other shares of artillery) and then forced to fend for maneuver against our vigorous counterattack brought on their right flank by our armored divisions, which were leaning to balance deployment of units still in the line, the initial positions, which broke several days all enemy attacks.

Under the protection of the right wing and steadfast behind the screen of the forward position on the line of Mareth, the entire 1st Army proceeded in moving in waves in three successive parts, deploying, in the morning of 28th, with part of the army of the line Akarit and the line of Gabes-El Hamma.

Given the huge shortage of vehicles, the favorable circumstance of being able to force the enemy to delay his frontal pressure, the need to maximize and as quickly as possible to the line of Akarit and especially not to give the enemy a chance to learn a new impact on the weak line of El Hamma-Gabes, the army command decided to leave on that line only mobile units, namely the Liebenstein group: the 90th Division, the 15th Armored Division, under the command of the 125th Spezia regiment of XXI Corps.

In the evening of the 28th these forces they were violently attacked by heavy armored masses that threatened to overwhelm; in the face of this threat and in consideration that the deployment of other units on the line of Akarit took place in perfect order and was now basted, the army command ordered these forces to fall back slowly, keeping contact with enemy units.

This phase of the difficult maneuver was conducted successfully concluded; He confesses the enemy, through the radio traffic intercepted, of "having lost, once again, a great chance."

In this observation, that, given the front, admits neither doubts nor interpretations, echoed the statements of the press and

enemy Radio, forced to say that the battle of Mareth "might not be the last defeat of the Allies" (Times, 03/25), and that Rommel (notoriously absent from Tunisia) (1) "*is a great fighter and a master in conducting the maneuvers of his troops.* "

It's too early to draw conclusions from events whose pace picks up dramatically.

But one thing is certain, however: the 1st Army, reborn to new life, the holder of all the traditions of pain and glory that are spent on the battlefield in North Africa (2), gave in this battle to the full extent of its high technical skills and moral.

The 1st Army, as decreased its military potential, of men and weapons, reaches out to new events with unshakable faith and with a firm determination to be equal to the height of the historical moment that the country spends.

General of the army
Commander of the 1st Army Italian
GIOVANNI MESSE

April 5, 1943

(1) The sentences in italics were deleted by Mussolini in the text presented to the press.

(2) Replaced by the phrase "to give all of herself to the extreme."

COMANDO SUPREMO
THE CHIEF OF THE G.S. GENERAL
Memo for the Duce

P.M., on March 24, 1943-XXI

TUNISIA

1) Possession of Tunisia is subject to a marked aerial predominance and a continuous and adequate flow of supplies.

These two conditions do not exist now.

The aircraft in the Axis line are about 350-400, while those enemies can interfere are about 2600 (the effective are much less both by ourselves and by the enemy). It is not known whether Germany should send as soon as possible a powerful contribution of aviation is however reason to believe that this is not possible.

The German G.S. makes it a condition for the continuation of the struggle to do flow around 150,000 tons. monthly, and the Fuhrer stressed in the letter to you sent on March 14, mentions that figure.

The experience of the past months shows that we can not even come to half of what is required.

Add the disproportion of tanks and armored cars between us and the enemy (Axis 230 tanks, 150 armored vehicles, enemy (520 tanks, 450 armored cars).

The situation described above requires to consider coldly the possibility that Tunisia can not be maintained.

2) The above perspective involves just two issues to consider:

a) -If Agree to continue putting means and men in the furnace Tunisia, playing the game of the enemy, or to reserve the one and the other for the serious tasks take place.

b) - At the last moment the ally ask ships for the outflow of materials.

These must not be granted, because Italy has no ships to spare.

One must consider that even after abandoned Tunisia, ships will be required to supply the Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, Albania, Greece and the Aegean, and that all enemy attack traffic that now mainly occurs on our trades for Tunisia, will pour trades for other theaters of war.

These trades will be extremely costly, and in anticipation of what we can not lose ships.

PROBABLE ENEMY INTENTIONS.

3) It is likely that the enemy liquidates the affair in Tunisian before further action, but it is also possible that at the same time or soon after attempting a landing in Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica or in the Balkan Peninsula.

The Allies do not hear directly and immediately threatened by an attack on the Italian peninsula and the little import that it be put to the sword: therefore, once evacuated Tunisia do not send anything.

It is likely that the interests of more than the attack on the Balkan peninsula and then will send units and media.

We must energetically prevent this Allied evaluation towards the Italian theater, insisting:

- Because the aircraft is greatly enhanced competition, in consideration that with a serious threat to the Strait of Sicily departing from bases in Sicily and Sardinia, it obstructs the traffic and indirectly defends the Balkan Peninsula, thus the interest of the Ally (it would be desirable to have the air supremacy of the Sicilian Channel);

- because we promptly send the tanks, weapons, anti-air artillery and the materials we required and that are absolutely necessary to oppose an enemy action.

MODE OF ENEMY ACTION.

4) Any attempt to land will certainly be preceded by a massive, repeated offense against air ports, and airports, and will probably be contemporary attempts paratroopers and air-landings.

We must therefore hinder the predicted air offensive, which is only possible with a strong fighter, with a massive bombardment of enemy airfields and with a robust counter-air defense, now very inefficient.

This is one more reason to insist on ally aid when it comes to aviation.

Under current conditions, we can not hinder a large enemy air attack, that will unhinge our defense, swinging back and forth greatly reactive ability, already low because of insufficient quantity and quality of media.

FURTHER CONDUCT OF THE OPERATION OF THE AXIS.

5) The general outline of the strategic future conduct of operations, the general rules for the defense of the southern front of Europe and the relevant function of the various theaters of war must be established in agreement between the two allies.

Only with the realistic view of common resources and possibilities, of our general situation and the enemy can draw the lines of the future joint conduct of the war, the agreed lines must be

established, and not only from an Ally, not to run into very serious consequences. It is not acceptable that in a struggle in which our country is directly and seriously threatened to be calculated the general conduct of the war with a one-sided view.

DEFENSE OF THE MOTHER COUNTRY.

6) In the current situation of forces and we mean we are not able to prevent a massive attempt to air-naval landing against our shores.

Also the recovery of some G.U. from the Balkans does not solve the problem, because such recovery would be delayed while the threat may be very close, and because the G.U. retrieved do not have weapons and means qualitatively suitable.

To improve, not solve the situation, it is necessary that the Allied them take care to:

- strengthen strongly Aviation of Sicily and Sardinia, and that is to defend, as well as Italy, even the Balkans;

- send us with all urgency many anti-aircraft artillery, anti-tank, armored vehicles, common artillery, etc. requested for the upgrading of the defense.

The personnel training takes months, so there is no time to lose.

For tanks they should be provided organic battalions.

Another serious problem is related to the above, and it is that of the necessity of recalls, supply and equipping the recalled.

Even for this should be called the aid of the ally (wheat, shoes, etc.).

DEFENSE OF THE BALKAN THEATER.

7) You can repeat the Greek theater what was said to the mother country in terms of failure of the defense and the need to have as soon as the ally aid in means anti-air, anti-tank, tanks, etc. ...

RECOVERY OF DIVISIONS.

8) As the recovery of divisions does not solve the problem of the defense, even though that recovery is to be found for obvious reasons.

a) -From Croatia is already expected to recover two divisions, the "*Sassari*" and the "1st Celere" in need of a large adjustment.

If we keep to the 2nd Army tasks and the current occupation, nothing else will be recoverable.

Reducing employment in the annexed territories, ie abandoning the Narenta valley with its mines, you may get other two divisions.

For a division of Montenegro it has already been prepared starting to Greece.

b) - Yield the Peloponnese to Germany and withdraw the Italian troops that are located therein (2 divisions).

It is better to divide the burden of defending to the ally, instead of having our order of battle of the German G.U., because this leads to the German claim operations management.

On the other hand, the Germans have already Crete can do with the Peloponnese system.

They are so group of 6 divisions that may get you (including the "Sassari" and "1st Celere") of which only four could be moved into the Motherland.

It is obvious that such decisions involve agreements with the ally and with the Croatian government: do not solve also the immanent system of defense of the Motherland.

ORGANIZATION OF COMMANDS.

9) Now we have many separate theaters of war, real compartmentalized, that does not make it easier to maneuver in the dosing of the forces between one theater and the other.

Supersloda will be put to the dependence of Superesercito.

We will instead study the establishment of a unified command of the Italian theaters of war Montenegro, Albania, Greece, Aegean, having essentially coordinating role.

An obstacle to the functioning of this command is certainly the existence of the Governorate of Montenegro and Albania Lieutenantcy.

It would be highly desirable that these bodies were deleted. In any way, you will also studied the methods to realize the unit command, whilst leaving life in the aforesaid civil governments.

CONCLUSIONS.

10) I need for this to be represented and discussed frankly and innuendo with the Allies, especially in order to establish his aid for the future, and to outline a common future strategic conduct of the war, on the basis of the potential enemy present and future and our real possibilities of struggle and internal resistance.

It is in every way to keep in mind that for our country are perhaps very next event of very serious war, that with our own strength we can not in any way prevent; we must demand ally involvement to the extent necessary and we have to get right away so it will not succeed late. Doing so will require a review of our policy.

MEETING AMBROSIO - KESSELRING
of March 28, 1943 -at 16:00

Present Adm. Girosi and, towards the end of the interview,
Also Adm. Ruge.

Mar. Kesselring: His Ecc. Messe expressed his satisfaction for the development of the withdraw.

Ecc. The Chief: And already aware of the appreciation of the situation of General Messe from his radio message received this morning.

Mar. Kesselring: The day before yesterday evening attack against the 164th Div. was particularly strong: almost two battalions were destroyed, our counter action to the southwest of El Hamma was very effective and the result is essentially due to the artillery, the Flak and anti-tank the action of the 15th and 21st Arm. Div.

The enemy no longer has insisted in the attack which proves the effectiveness of our action.

For last night was expected to set up a flank defensive to ensure the extraction of troops of Mareth.

The deployment of this morning was predicted with the troops on the line of Chott; elsewhere, the greater, between El Hamma and Gabes; forward the 15th and the 21st Arm. Div.

Ecc. The Chief: According to the information we have, therefore, at this time the line of Mareth there should not be any more.

Mar. Kesselring: Yesterday flew down the line of Chott and reported the impression that the line is very good especially if will be enhanced by the work.

There is in part a natural trench and partly a man-made ditch.

Ecc. The Chief: He asks the appreciation of the situation in his right side considering that the Chott can be crossed.

Mar. Kesselring: Affirms be a great location flanking; also take into account that the enemy will have serious difficulties in the deployment of artillery.

Ecc. The Chief: He asked whether the withdrawal is considered timely,

Mar. Kesselring: Responds state that it is also the opinion of General von Arnim and Messe.

Ecc. The Chief: He asked about the situation in the Macnassi and Founduk.

Mar. Kesselring: A Macnassi do not see a particular danger - have flowed many reinforcements; Founduk to all attacks were rejected, von Arnim is quiet can provide with its own forces-now has four battalions of reserve.

It will take, however, reserve of the 5th Army also tanks and will give them to him as soon as possible.

Refers to the intention of C.S. to issue directives for the possibility of a further withdrawal and believes that for now it is not appropriate to send them.

Ecc. The Chief: He says that on the basis of the latest news from the guidelines will not be made. General von Arnim already know the intention of Rommel before his departure and so for now it is better to wait.

Demands to know how the aviation has acted.

Mar. Kesselring: As long as the weather was good the intervention was very effective, both day and night. As of yesterday, however, it has been inactive for Ghibli.

Ecc. The Chief: On the whole, the impression is that the operations were conducted very well. Appropriate to convey a word of praise to the commanders.

Mar. Kesselring: Since most days are no steamboats arriving in Tunisia.

The success is due to the action of artillery, tank and aviation.

Based on what he saw and heard the Army can hope again four days.

He has given orders that all devices are available Germanic transporting men and gasoline and hopes to bring 200 tons per day.

He combined with transport all "Ju", the "Savoy" and also all the bombers until now in proficient formations.

With good weather planes will have to make two trips a day.

By Italian air arm it should be done the same for supplies of the Italian 1st Army and air units.

Ecc. The Chief: This morning has affected the *Ecc. Fougier* because intensified transport.

Mar. Kesselring: With this exceptional measure, that is, to employ the two aircraft, one can carry the bare minimum.

Tomorrow afternoon there will be an improvement in the weather, we should start the vessels.

Ecc. The Chief: And ready a large convoy. In Tunis 5 ships will outnumber light ships. You will be started as soon as possible.

Mar. Kesselring: Tomorrow morning at dawn we will fly equipment for better meteorological data.

Materials are used for battle but also serve men. He knew he was suspended on personal transport with destroyers. It realizes the difficult situation of the Italian Navy, but asks that consideration be given to resume such transport performing one every two days with two fighters.

Ecc. The Chief: He says that the decision is irrevocable. The losses that we had are too serious - we can not suffer other; make it impossible to exit the fleet.

Mar. Kesselring: He says that in this period we have only lost two fighters and these to a navigational error.

Ecc. The Chief: Whichever way the enemy attack is focused on the route of Tunisia and the risk is serious.

Mar. Kesselring: He asks how it he support the personnel in Africa. *Adm. Girosi:* We still have 9 efficient destroyers in total - we can not risk losing more.

Mar. Kesselring: Are you aware of the need to provide for the use of the fleet, it had to insist on the urgent needs of the ongoing battle.

Adm. Girosi: Can you think of two steamers fast (15 1/2 knots) "Anagni" and "Aquinas".

Mar. Kesselring: For his part, in recent days has done the most to make up for the lack of naval transportation for air transportation: led 400 mc. of fuel per day.

Should return to the transport of personnel with the destroyers to continue transport of fuel and men with planes.

Adm. Girosi: He repeats that there is no more availability of destroyers.

Mar. Kesselring: When will Tunisia lost the fleet will not help in anything.

Ecc. The Chief: States he can not accept this concept. Instead it will be right, then that will serve the fleet.

Mar. Kesselring: it would like to represent to the Duce the need to resume the transport with the destroyers.

Ecc. The Chief: The Duce can not change the situation; further use of destroyers is impossible. We call on all Sm. 84 and bring with them personnel.

Mar. Kesselring: He insists in wanting to go to the Duce essentially in order to report since he depends directly, and what to put in place its responsibility.

Ecc. The Chief: He realizes the opportunity that Marshal Kesselring safeguard its responsibilities with OKW and ask the Duce when want to receive it.

Mar. Kesselring: it mentions the need to be accelerated to destroyers in the yards in Toulon.

Adm. Girosi: It proposes to make this trip even with the landing craft loaded with materials and then assign to personnel transport.

Mar. Kesselring: disagrees. He studies and within two days will make new proposals.

Ecc. The Chief: He says that for his part will have that all aircraft are used to transport personnel and also in relation to the request made yesterday by General Westphall.

Mar. Kesselring: It was represented everything but now we must urgently establish greater urgency for ammunition and fuel.

Ecc. The Chief: The new line is cheaper; for this reason it is more urgent to bring ammunition and gasoline then personnel.

Mar. Kesselring: agree; It notes that we are just at the beginning of the battle and you will also need personnel.

Ecc. The Chief: We can not do that in the short run programs.

Mar. Kesselring: It is urgent to carry 8,000 men and then another 10,000.

Ecc. The Chief: The transport then will continue through April; yesterday and General Westphall also spoke of May.

Mar. Kesselring: Should I tell the Duce that the Fuhrer has ordered a strengthening of air for us. Will be: 1 Group heavy bombers - one group -then destroyers bulk equipment to be disposed of German aviation. In order it must immediately provide the training of the Italian crews; make arrangements in detail with his Ecc. Fougier.

Ecc. The Chief: A total of how many planes come?

Mar. Kesselring: About 110-120 and then, in addition, those in bulk. Returns to the request to set up a command of the German stage in Battipaglia and Paola.

Ecc. The Chief: Confirmation that the measure is not necessary, is provided requests from time to time and will be done.

Mar. Kesselring: it asks to increase the number of provisions convoys to the Germans for Sicily.

Ecc. The Chief: they pass an average of 101 per day which corresponds to the provisions.

Mar. Kesselring: He says that according to his information will pass only 80; there is something wrong.

Ecc. The Chief: You will give the media last week and then the matter will be reviewed with the Marshal Kesselring.

MEETING MUSSOLINI -KESSELRING
of March 29, 1943 -at 12:45

Present: Gen. Ambrosio
Gen. Westphall

Field Marshal Kesselring refers to the letter written by the Duce to the Fuhrer about the request for the increase of the Germans Aerial Units for Italy, and communicates to the Duce that the Fuhrer ordered to assign to the OBS another 3 groups including 1 fighter of F. W. 190, one of the destroyers of Me 110 and 1 equipped with Ju. 88. bombers It reports that he had an interview with Ecc. Fougier about the training of crews and pilots of Italian and German aircraft had reached in principle a full agreement on the matter. For the bombardment, the education of the crews Italian is already in place (12 teams) and also taking advantage of the schools in the south of France, will begin training another 30 crews. For fighters, the first group that currently is found in Rome, will send its personnel to Sicily - including specialist -in a way that each of the three squadrons make the transition of Mc G6 and complete training in 4 weeks; in training it is also included a period of aggressive actions that will be carried out by Italian personnel as part of a Germanic stormo stops the organic remains of the Italian squad. As for the bombardment and reconnaissance, the training cycle and war made by the Italian crews, will have a duration of 6-8 weeks; then the crews will take delivery of the Ju.88 at the time promised by Germany and a part of which is found already in Monaco. For fighters instead, after 4 weeks of training provided, the three Italian squadrons fall with German aircraft reforming the organic group.

When asked how the Duce as both the F.M. considered the situation in Tunisia, these replies that as regards the south face the situation does not bother him, since the withdraw on the line of Chott is taking place according to plan. As of yesterday, however, throughout the west front the enemy is very active which led at some point to the need to adjust the front itself. Especially in the north were destroyed two battalions were targets and further south, the source of the "Centauro" and Xa Armored, the enemy was able to infiltrate the rear of our line. Nevertheless, in the tactical situation it can be considered satisfactory. I not so in terms of supplies because, due to bad weather, in the last eight days have not arrived in Africa they do individual ships convoys. Perhaps now the state of the sea will allow the output of all the means available. On the other hand the situation of fuel and ammunition

It is such that you need to use all aerial means available to overcome these days of crisis delivering the necessary materials by air. Added to this is the very serious problem of the personnel: it's not just to restore the sharp losses in recent days had Cbersaglieri, 164th Light, etc.), But it is also about bringing to Africa organic units.

The F.M. He says that by air could carry 1,500 people daily in Africa, but right now it is absolutely essential to load on aircraft fuel and ammunition so as to overcome these days of crisis, until you will arrive in Tunisia ships which have been prepared and blocked by bad weather.

Required by Duce how many men should be immediately transported, The FM answers that can be, as a first urgent revenue, about 10,000, of whom half are complementary and the other half of the organic units.

Given the urgent need for Tunisia to these men, asking if there is no need to review once again, despite the well-known and legitimate difficulties the problem of destroyers.

To this question, the Duce replies that the Navy believes now impossible to risk the loss of other such ships. Losses were in the latter time sensitive and must think that all the other dangers are now joined in increasingly large proportion of the mines. On the other hand, given the situation in the Mediterranean and the likely intentions of the enemy, it is necessary to make the fleet ready, which can not go out without an escort of DDs. In addition, the Duce is noted that according to all evidence, you can think of that the enemy intends to act both in the western Mediterranean and in the Eastern Europe. More precisely, on the one hand he tries to land or to attack Sicily and Sardinia, the other will try to make a landing in Greece; This is also confirmed by the fact that in Egypt today is found the old Greek sovereign. If these forecasts were to be realized we can not avoid a battle and we must, no matter what happens, use fully our battleships. To do this it is indispensable to have the minimum of DDs that can ensure the protection of the fleet. This is the reason why the Duce considers it necessary to provide air transport of men in Tunisia. Also there is still a matter of moral order to which he attaches great importance: the loss of troops at sea, lost in this last time was extremely painful. It reiterates therefore the need to employ the aerial means for the transport of troops, leaving to ships the task of transporting the material.

The F.M. fully shares this view, but it is once again the need to use these days for the aircraft, in their entirety, only for the transport of gasoline and ammunition.

The Duce emphasizes his point of view about the impossibility of use

the DDs. the more so in bad weather many mines of our barriers will be dissolved and will constitute a new danger to navigation.

The F.M. notes that the sweeping of the routes will naturally be more essential than ever after this period of bad weather and on the other hand, to ensure navigation, it is in the process of placing a radio-beacon at Tunis.

The Duce returns to the concept of making the maximum effort with aviation and addressed to the Chief of Staff General notes that this effort must also be borne by aviation Italian using all available aircraft, Sm. 84 including, possibly making two trips a day.

The Chief of the G.S. General replied that he had already taken yesterday evening contact with Ecc. Fougier and that today the F.M. He had already had a talk with himself. Apparently, the greatest difficulties are due to the impossibility of converging on the few fields in Tunisia, a number of aircraft so strong.

The Duce returning to examine the situation in Tunisia earth, promises the possibility of a retreat from the line to the north of the location of the Chott to avoid being surrounded by the enemy.

The F.M. notes in this regard that a subsequent shortening of the lines would make smaller still our beachhead; and this perhaps would not withstand more than in Tunisia. Each of our withdrawal, narrowing the beachhead, the enemy always has a better chance.

The F.M. considers, however, that bringing in Africa petrol and ammunition the situation needs to be a definite improvement.

The Duce addressed to the Chief of the G.S. General expressed the desire to see tonight the Air Force Secretary, to hear from them the possibility of the Italian air transport as well as 10,000 German men must also provide the transport of our troops.

MEETING AMBROSIO - KESSELRING
of March 29, 1943 -at 16:00

Ecc. The Chief: I did warn the Mar. Kesselring I meant give way to transmit notes direct you, because I consider it necessary given the developments of the situation, and I think that General von Arnim feels a bit tied in his action , from the previous orders.

Mar. Kesselring: The way I see it can be dangerous psychological repercussions of these directives. Gen. Westphall prepared the draft of another order that I want to submit.

It goes like this:

"In relation to the development of the situation I would add the following commands to those referred to the sheet ...

The Army Group Africa has the task of defending the position of *Chott*. A break of the west face must be avoided by all means and for this purpose it is necessary to devote sufficient reserves.

Be avoided by all means the risk of breakage in Macnassi-El Ghettar, running counter with all the armored units available, as soon as they arrived refueling.

If, despite all efforts, the current front could not be maintained and it should prove inevitable rupture of the front by the enemy, the armed group may withdraw, step by step, to the position of Enfidaville, after asking permission to this Command Supreme".

Then follow guidelines about the preparations for the organization of the new position and the aid of the aviation.

Ecc. The Chief: Overall the order of General Westphall no substantial new elements. And much detail as draws particular attention to the sector of the "Centauro".

My idea is to give to Gen. von Arnim right to break away if the situation becomes serious enough to threaten the security of the position.

Mar. Kesselring: I would consider it appropriate to specify that it must be just a break in front of the very important because a broken small entity must respond with counter, to rectify the situation.

Ecc. The Chief: But we must also make predictions as not to be late then, at the appropriate time. Resist as much as possible, but if the threat is very strong on the side must necessarily think about withdraw.

Mar. Kesselring: The Fuhrer had said that the line of *Chott* had to be considered as the last position.

Ecc. The Chief: I understand that the Mar. give particular importance to what the Fuhrer said. These are my directions, however, already been submitted to the Duce had told me to send them certainly.

I expected so far only for a respect to Mar. Kesselring.

Mar. Kesselring: I was still opposed to issue of directives to not give to see. Arnim the concept of withdraw, while it is still necessary to deal a blow to the enemy.

Ecc. The Chief: On the other hand is the same v. Arnim touting orders, which do you mean that you need a certain freedom of action in the event the situation deteriorates.

Mar. Kesselring: Since V.E. He can not travel to confer with Gen. v. Arnim, I propose to send to Tunisia Gen. Westphall with a General of the Comando Supremo.

Ecc. The Chief: The directives are already in a sealed envelope with Gen. Mattioli, who awaits orders to deliver them. Today he left for Tunisia with Gen. Rossi, future Chief of Operations of the Comando Supremo, and with him will join Gen. Westphall.

Mar. Kesselring: I propose that General Westphall illustrating directives to Gen. v. Arnim speak of the concept of using armored vehicles on the flanks.

Ecc. The Chief: He's fine. Fight on the flank as soon as we have means available.

Mar. Kesselring: Today I sent fuel and therefore will be able to act with armored vehicles.

Ecc. The Chief: He's fine. Gen. Westphall will deliver the yield by Gen. Mattioli and he will deliver to Gen. v. Arnim illustrating it as now said. Also in the first part of the directives is replaced the term "southern front" with the term "current position".

It is finally agreed to meet at El Gem at 11:00 hours of tomorrow the 30th Gen. Westphall with General Rossi and Mattioli.

MEETING AMBROSIO - KESSELRING
of April 6, 1943

Mar. Kesselring: I refer to the letter with which the Comando Supremo, responding to my request for use in air transport the "S. 84", said that this was not possible, to communicate that after recent heavy "Ju 52" losses, my situation has significantly worsened in respect of air transport equipment.

Already at that time I represented the Marshal Cavallero the Duce and the need to send German troops to Tunisia, which, having a better armament of the Italian ones, are best suited to defend some of these important positions. Even yesterday I explained to the Duce the minimum of forces that, in my opinion, it is still essential to send in Tunisia.

Another point of the letter of the Comando Supremo that raises some concerns me is that in which it makes mention of the possibility of falling back on the Enfidaville line. In this connection, I confirm that I consider essential to keep the line of *Chott*.

Mussolini asked me if my vision was not too optimistic; I told him that if commands and troops will to resist and if we can feed them, the position can be maintained.

There are commanders of the G. U. that they regret not having the strength to take advantage of their favorable tactical situation and I just want to draw your attention to the opportunity of exploiting certain tactical situations propitious.

Ecc. The Chief: I consider it appropriate to specify you about that: in an interview occurred at 02:00 hours of the day on November 17th '42 with Marshal Cavallero, having mentioned these quadrilateral Biserta- Tunis, I stated that I believed in what you were after enter into a long maneuver of withdraw.

Now if we arrived so early to the line of the *Chott*, this is due to Marshal Rommel who at the time did not offer any resistance.

Mar. Kesselring: The fact is positive.

Ecc. The Chief: It is well known that the Italian general, starting with the Marshal Bastico, wanted to resist, while Marshal Rommel wanted to retreat.

Just knowing these ideas of Marshal Rommel and his plan for the immediate withdrawal of Enfidaville, I supported the idea that the Marshal does not go back in Africa.

Mar. Kesselring: On this subject, I will talk about the Fuhrer and the Duce in the coming meetings.

Ecc. The Chief: And if I do not talk about them will raise the issue.

Currently we have the General v. Arnim which follows the directives of the Supreme Command in Africa but if you had a commander who was acting of his head, the situation would fall immediately.

I can not forget that if Rommel had been at the time restrained, we would still be in Tobruk.

Mar. Kesselring: In principle I was not even agree on that operation, from which we were, so to speak, overwhelmed.

Ecc. The Chief: Remember that had been set a date on which to stop, in order to make the operation of Malta.

Mar. Kesselring: I agree. As for the next retreat I agree that some positions could resist.

Ecc. The Chief: Basically in this long retreat of 2000 km., We began to resist when Rommel disappeared.

Mar. Kesselring: I'd rather not talk longer on this subject, knowing what about the ideas of Fuhrer.

Ecc. The Chief: I made this premise to the conclusion that the line of *Chott* we must hold out as long as possible and this also in consideration that a withdrawal took place on the plains of troops on foot would be extremely difficult, given the availability of enemy armored masses.

Mar. Kesselring: I would like to ask you to give orders that are carried out attacks with small radius to improve the situation in some units; I came to tell you about it because of what you can instruct Ecc. Rossi, as you will be away.

Ecc. The Chief: The access to the desire of the Marshal, but noted that, judging by the Italian mentality, I would not give that order.

Mar. Kesselring: I agree but I would point out that the situation in Tunisia is closely connected with the supply situation and on this Army Group Command does not have all the elements that are in our possession.

However, if you wish I can deal with the matter verbally with General v. Arnim.

Ecc. The Chief: For I prefer it that way, if I were in the place of that

commander of the army group, not would like to receive similar orders.

Mar. Kesselring: The experience of the war tells me that on many occasions you would have lost the battle if the high command had not fallen in certain orders of a special nature.

By going in Tunisia I often found that commanders undergo the influence that I call "African". My look confident and optimistic always follows good moral results.

Communicates a message which announces that at 05:15 this morning the enemy started a strong shot artillery preparation. Our front remains stationary.

I learned that O.K.M. He can not make available to the Italian navy the amount of fuel oil required.

Let me know if this will have repercussions for the provisions for the transport of men with DDs and the laying of mines.

Ecc. The Chief: Nothing changed as far as transport reflects men as it was already decided that the escort they could no longer perform this service.

It will continue the work of the mines.

Mar. Kesselring: the Fuhrer will represent the need to assign some DD transport of German men and among the escort the "Hermes".

Ecc. The Chief: The DD. "Hermes" is already committed for mine laying.

Mar. Kesselring: Upon completion of this task will be used to transport men and then we will also have the bulk of the DDs now the yards in Toulon.

Unfortunately air transport now no longer give primary safety.

Ecc. The Chief: It is necessary that the Marshal is convinced that not only Tunisia but also Italy is in danger. Sardinia is threatened then independently by the fall of Tunisia.

Mar. Kesselring: Certainly, however, that Italy defends better until the Tunisian ports are in our hands.

In time, the proposal of the Fuhrer, approved by the Duce and the Marshal Cavallero was established, within the Comando Supremo, one GS dealing with matters relating to navy and air force.

For the maritime part, even though the German navy in the Mediterranean to My directly responsible, I always left that in the care of the Supermarina, considering with what feels most comfortable to use.

There is a close collaboration between you and me and between the General and the General Gandin Westphall and thus cooperation is excellent with regard to army and air force. Equally vice versa can not be said with regard to the navy. I would therefore propose to centralize also the naval part in the hands of General Gandin.

Ecc. The Chief: I think not perfect cooperation depends not on the organization but by the people.

I not personally know your naval officer but I think he knows it perfectly in his duties as mixed commands must maintain a continuous spirit of cooperation, which is the one that exists between me and you.

Now I can not admit that requests are made in the form of imposition of will and it is precisely for this form that your officer has met some resistance.

Mar. Kesselring: It is a good officer, but he may have sinned in the form. I am very grateful for what I have said and will place it also matters of form are put in place.

Ecc. The Chief: For my part I assure you. in which case all goes well.

Mar. Kesselring: I would like to ask you to speed up the repairs of some steamers recently damaged.

Ecc. The Chief: It notes the ensuing provisions.

Mar. Kesselring: I would also point another issue that concerns me. The steamer "Regina" recently hit during the trip from Taranto to Messina now returned to Taranto. For some time now that the coastal route is threatened by lurking submarines. Please have examined if he does not agree to study another route.

Ecc. The Chief: Call Admiral Riccardi giving the resulting orders.

MEMO OF THE COMANDO SUPREMO ON
CONFERENCE OF KLESSHEIM

COMANDO SUPREMO
1st UNIT

P.M. 21, on March 31, 1943-XXI

TOPICS TO BE TREATED IN THE KNOWN CONFERENCE

1) GENERAL CONDUCT OF THE WAR

Single view of the conduct of the war whose general lines are to be fixed by agreement with the ally.

Need to consider equally exposed the Italian peninsula and the Balkan Peninsula. Importance that, even in Germany, the defense of our country.

The need to combat the traffic of the enemy in the Strait of Sicily and for the defense of Italy who take part in the defense of the Balkans.

2) ARMY

I) *on Defense of Italy*

a) Valuation likely intentions of the enemy.

Situation our divisions and coastal defense: we need weapons, artillery, tanks that we required and that are absolutely essential for the defense of our coasts.

b) The need for us to recover troops from Croatia (reduced in response to the occupation annexed territories, the railway of the oils and the coast of Herzegovina).

Reinforcement to be given by German, for Greece.

II) *Africa*

a) Examination of the situation in Tunisia: disproportion of forces than the opponent and difficulties supplies.

b) Definition of the position of Marshal Rommel.

c) German unit found in Tunisia and those that are yet to be sent.

d) Request pieces of medium caliber 88 and 75 against the tanks for Tunisia.

e) Concentration of all means of transport available, air and sea, for an employment unit.

f) News about operating Italian units N.A.

III) *Croatia*

a) The German military policy in Croatia (force distribution

Croatian; need for the Italian-German military policy in Croatia is carried out with full cooperation and through preventive arrangements).

Remember that the basis of the Italian-Croatian accords of 18 May 1941 Article 3 of the Treaty, Art. 1 of the military - are still regarded as basic elements for the military policy in Croatia, although the contingent military situation forced us to evictions and recoveries forces.

b) The recent operations of Weiss.

- Expected period of eviction by the German mining area;
- Any operations south of the dividing line are held in the area of influence of Italian military and therefore must be coordinated by us;
- The Italian contribution to Weiss was at least equal if not superior to the German.

IV) *Montenegro* (Designed operations against Mihajlovic)

- They are not appropriate operations in a big way and consequent shift to a policy of force.

V) *General control in the Balkans*

- The question of control in Greece and the Aegean.

VI) *Supplies to Greece and the Aegean.*

VII) *Russian Front -8th Army*

a) Conduct battle of Don (rectify German tendency to attribute general retreat to failure of the allies).

b) Withdraw II and XXXV Corp.

c) Withdraw C.A. Alpine.

d) Movement of the 8th Army to the area of reorganization.

VIII) *Reconstitution II Army Coup in Russia.*

IX) *Competition of units and Germanic material.*

a) Germans Bodies in Italy and their tendency to extend its tasks.

b) Goodwill 150,000 Italian soldiers in Germany for training in A/A defense and the sale of related materials.

c) Materials granted by the German for the strengthening of Italy, Greece and the Dodecanese.

d) Germanic assault Brigade designed to Sardinia.

e) Germanic assault Brigade designed to the Aegean.

3) NAVY

I) -The fuel oil situation: needs of the German aid, especially with the release of the main naval forces.

II) -Material and means already asked of Admiral Doenitz.

III) Final approval for organizing the command in the Aegean Sea.

IV) - German aid to overcome the crisis of manpower for the shipyards.

V) A reply to Reichsmarschall Goering about supplies to Tunisia.

4) AIR FORCE

I) - Strengthening German air forces or transfer aircraft Ju 88 and Me 109 to the Italian Air Force to replenish the budgets of unit deficit.

II) - Ceding night fighters aircraft to ensure at least a minimum of forces for the fight night, the organization in place.

III) -Fuel and aviation lubricants.

IV) - French aircraft Industry: arrangement of the ongoing dispute with the Italian Air Force will to ensure at least the monthly contribution of twenty aircraft.

V) - Daimler Benz 605 Engines, to compensate for the imbalance between the production of modern fighter aircraft and the DB 605 engine built in Italy.

5) VARIOUS

I) - German transport aid to compensate for the deficiency.

II) -Provision RADAR equipment.

III) -Request materials telecommunications.

IV) - Behavior of Germans in Italy.

V) - Our behavior toward French Jews.

MEETING VON ARNIM - MESSE
of April 6, 1943

Present:

General *Cramer*- Comandante D.A.K.

General *Gause* - Chief of G.S. Army Group.

General *Mancinelli* - Chief of G.S. Italian 1st Army.

General *Bayerlein* - Chief of G.S. German 1st Army.

General *Mattioli* - Chief of G.S. connection.

Von Arnim. He asks what the Army intends to guard the positions that will be reoccupied as a result of counter-current attack.

Gen. Messe. He expresses the opinion that it is necessary to make a decision before knowing the outcome of the ongoing counter attack.

At this time (15:30) is going to initiate the counter attack of the 15th Arm. Div. having the purpose of eliminating the bag created in the area of the "*Trieste*".

Von Arnim. He asks what outcome is expected.

Gen. Messe. The situation will be restored, provided that necessary measures are taken before the arrival of enemy tanks.

He therefore recommended to the Commander of the 15th Arm. Div. to hurry, as the aerial reconnaissance spotted a hundred tanks advancing towards the northwest. These tanks could either go on the road of Gafsa (this is less likely) or go to exploit the success of the infantry.

The Commander of the XX Corps. pointed out that the bag has the breadth of 2 km. approximately to a depth almost equal and corresponds to the position held by the I and II battalion of the 65th infantry "*Trieste*" and by the battalion "*Folgore*".

In the field of the XXI Corps is undergoing a counterattack developed by two battalions of the 361st infantry, that starting from the north, had to try to resume hill 275 occupied by the enemy.

He was ordered to the Commander of the XXI Corps to unhook the entire 164th Division, replacing it with a machine-gun battalion and four Sahara companies of the Sahara Grouping. The 164th division is then brought in correspondence to the left of the "*Pistoia*" not only to regain parts of hills 275 and 210, but also to restore the situation on Meida, in cooperation with the 361st Infantry.

This action will be carried out in correspondence by the two corps but will be coordinated by the General Berardi.

Gave notice, finally, that there seems to be a leak in the Valle Amor, but there are three companies "*Pistoia*" they're performing a counterattack.

This is a summary of the situation at this time.

Von Arnim. You ask what predictions can be made about the success of the counterattack and which is the action of artillery.

Gen. Messe. It states that if counterattacks are conducted with enthusiasm and vigor and without wasting time, they need to succeed.

Artillery beats everything I can. But the more time passes, the more difficult the situation becomes. If you do not restore the situation in the evening is not possible that it could be restored tomorrow, can not have other forces available.

Right now the Army has committed all the few reserves and has also removed forces from areas less committed (including the battalion 'M' of the "GG.FF." to engage them in the areas that are more so.

Von Arnim. He asks where it is believed that the enemy can still exert his effort.

Gen. Messe. Presumably on both directions of the main roadway and Gafsa.

The *Jebel Roumana* since both pillar from the thresholds. Need to be stopped at this pillar and the other of Meida and hills. 275, 210. But it should also have the strength to counterattacks.

Von Arnim. Ask what you can count on to protect the positions regained.

Gen. Messe. We can not say with precision, but it can be assumed that the "*Trieste*" has lost almost three battalions. The "*Pistoia*" already had three companies less. The "*Spezia*" do not yet have news, but will probably lost two or three battalions.

Von Arnim. Question what the situation of anti-tank weapons.

Gen. Messe. It's hard to know. Of course it will be difficult to recover the weapons deployed on the front line, dealing mostly with stationary weapons.

Von Arnim. Ask what you can hopefully still holding to counterattacks succeeded.

Gen. Messe. Hopefully a few battalions of the 164th and the 15th Arm. If it is not consumed.

Von Arnim. He asks how many days of attacks like this the Army is able to resist.

Gen. Messe. The question can not be answered. Account should be taken that the enemy can feed the attack, while we can not feed the defense.

It may be that we can still hold, but the concern arises if the enemy manages to penetrate the positions with tanks.

Von Arnim. He believes that the enemy will hardly be able to go through the road of Gafsa.

Gen. Messe. And the same opinion. It is easier for the enemy to presses on, however in the areas of "*Spezia*" and "*Trieste*".

Von Arnim. He claims to have brought here all the forces of DAK he could.

Gen. Messe. Informs that during a visit yesterday to

XXI Corps. he ordered the relocation eastward of the 361st infantry and it was a very appropriate order, which allowed to rule in hand for the counterattack.

Von Arnim. Would like to know the opinion of Gen. Messe about how many days you can keep it, even if this warning is only an assumption or a hope.

Gen. Messe. He believes two days -today and tomorrow-. You can still keep throwing until the last man in the furnace, but everything is sacrificed. On the other hand, at this time there is nothing else to do.

Von Arnim. He asks what is the opinion about the attitude that held the enemy if he could drive him back today from positions occupied if retry the attack or if it will need some time to recover.

Gen. Messe. You can not give an opinion, if the enemy does not attack again tomorrow will mean that the losses incurred are likely to force it to re-form. But again, you can not say anything about it.

Von Arnim. He asks what is the situation of supplies of ammunition and fuel.

Gen. Mancinelli. And satisfactory. In the worst situation are the German artillery which had only 0.8 *unfoc.*

Gen. Gause. States that all that is in Africa will be brought here.

In Africa is currently 1.5 *unfoc.*

Von Arnim. Come back tomorrow, after the events tonight have had their development, and if the situation of the other fronts will be such as to permit this.

At a concluding remark of Gen. Messe about the relationship of 16 to 450 armored vehicles of the enemy, Gen. von Arnim and the Commander of D .A. K. point out that there are 70 to 80 tanks coming from the north, including the *Tiger*.

COMANDER 1st ARMY
REPORT ON THE BATTLE OF CHOTTS (5-6 April 1943).

1. -The Battle of Mareth-el Hamma, March 17 to 31, although an authentic undeniable success of our arms, for the same commitment with which our troops they had launched in the fight without mental reserves of sacrifice, was cost painful losses: 16 battalions, 31 batteries for two-thirds Italian. It is also known that to determine this figure had competition, in part, the serious deficiency of vehicles for the transport of troops in the field of el Hamma, where they had lost also by the aforementioned batteries, while on the line Mareth had not been left neither a projectile or a cannon. He added that during the battle or shortly after reaching the line of Chotts Commander Army Group, to units off developments of enemy attacks on the west and especially the saddle of el Guettar, had removed, in addition to the 21st Armored Division, 3 battalions and 8 batteries.

Thus, on 31 March, the organic forces of the army recorded a decrease in overall efficiency of 19 battalions and 39 batteries: serious vacuum in relation to our actual scarce and it was impossible to fill before the new enemy attack that was taking shape very near .

The positions of the line of Chotts, for lack of reinforcement materials, mines, manpower, equipment and time, they had reached a degree of readiness not so much as even modest insufficient; in the context of the work of comparison with the line Mareth is not even feasible: to 150,000 landmines were used there finding 8,000 in the line of Chotts, where, in addition, only a few sparse hedge of barbed wire protecting limited stretches of fields, charged with defending the few stretches of anti-tank ditch, hastily dug. This inadequate development of the work, while one hand was reflected negatively on the whole complex of defensive system, accounted, on the other hand, also on the deployment of troops; line sections that based on the work of strengthening comprehensive, they could only be watched, absorbed, however, troops and weapons for a more substantial employment that would give at least a minimum of time to the development of counter-attacks.

One shortcoming of the most serious, absolutely unbridgeable, it had under the links: the Army not only has no means of connection suitable for the war of movement, but not in quantity and quality sufficient for that position. At Mareth this deficiency had been felt less, since it had been able to recover with few permanent works in the extensive French network;

Chotts was poor on the existing network and more scarce were the means for the renovations that the aerial bombardment and the enemy artillery would make indispensable; the action command to the smaller units (the fronts necessarily very large) it appeared hampered by many difficulties; proved particularly difficult to use maneuvered artillery that Mareth had been perfect.

If all these shortcomings of an organic tactical adding those particularly serious logistical (deficiency increasingly vocal of equipment, ammunition, trucks that are consumed without replenishment), if you add that our aviation shows increasingly rarely in heaven from Tunisia, where you admit that the 1st Army went initiating the battle of Chotts in a situation extremely material heavy.

But the troops, which these deficiencies could not escape because every deficiency is for them an increase of suffering, were preparing to fight with cold determination and dogged tenacity.

2. -At enemy troops go into battle, the battle of Mareth-el Hamma is -for their own confession - It costs much more than us. But since the balance of power between the 8th Army and ours it is not even feasible (to April 5 against 450 British tanks we can just counter oppose with 16) the enemy has no reason to delay for further upgrades. He has some divisions (in particular the 7th armored) which have only touched the previous battle: the sufficient time necessary to resume as soon as the forces to the hand, to prepare the observers for the use of artillery, to perform the necessary Polls our lines, in order to concentrate the effort in the field they think most delicate one between the head of Akarit and the Gabès-Gafsa road. A similar evaluation, for our part done by the Commander of which, not content to have dosed in connection with such delicacy deployment of the divisions, even on the eve of the battle approaches in this area all the meager supply available: 361st German regiment (of 2 battalions) the edge of the area between "*Pistoia*" and "*Spezia*", 200th German regiment (of 2 battalions) the edge of the area between "*Spezia*" and "*Trieste*", as has already arranged the movement of the German 15th Armored Division (which remained with 16 tank) to the area of Garaet Fatnassa on the rear and in the midst of these reserves; as well as that of the German 164th Division, from a field of lesser importance to that of the "*Spezia*" that is considered essential.

The enemy attack begins approximately 23:00 hours with a current of 5 imposing preparation of artillery performed by over 500 guns very mobile, for most medium calibers from 114 and 152, that the enemy, thanks to their mobility, combined his face at the last minute, keeping, however, the deployment of the offense out of our artillery notoriously provided range of smaller and poorly ammunition.

Suddenly R.A.F. It extends the action of fire deep acquiring and maintaining the absolute mastery of the sky throughout the course of the battle.

Supported by this apocalyptic hurricane of iron and fire the infantry attack British move the enterprise momentum with the advanced elements beyond anti-tank the ditch between the head of Akarit and *Jebel Roumana*, infiltrating direction *Gebel el Meida* and the *Rass ez Zouai*; enemies sappers assault are now truck carried since at whether ditch anti-tank trying quickly to fill to give passage to the armored brigades have already begun on routes chosen. The reaction of our troops in place immediately while the controls further back, were absolutely no links are struggling (by officers sent in different directions) to form a clear picture of the current situation. However as that enemy action proceeds and intensifies, it is clear that the enemy, at the price of costly losses (make faith in RT his communications) managed to gain ground and to occupy the hill 275, *Rass ez Zouai*, to set foot on the *Gebel el Meida* and dangerous constitute a bag on the front of the division "*Trieste*" between *Jebel Roumana* and front of *Akarit*.

He is willing to use the reserves of the Army where the enemy has made major advances: the 361st German Regiment, in conjunction with parts of the "*Pistoia*" Division, regaining the momentum hill 275 and restores consistency to our whole defensive system at *Meida*; 200th German regiment with the 15th Armored Division rejects over the anti-tank ditch the enemy infantry between *Roumana* and the front of *Akarit* at the same time destroying all enemy tanks that the British were able to pass on the price of blood. It is evident that the enemy at the moment through a crisis: it is detected by a communication of the English 51st Infantry Division commander, almost resulted on the front lines, calls "a revision of plans before everything is coming to the dogs." But the commander of the Army has no more strength to throw in the battle although it has already boldly ordered the evacuation of an entire sector is not committed to recover the remains of the 164th German division, reduced to the proportions of three battalions with 3 (read it 3) pieces artillery.

In the late afternoon the enemy renewed his attacks concentrating the effort in the field of "*Spezia*" between *Jebel Roumana* and *Gebel el Meida*; our units are struggling desperately against the enemy motorized brigades who receive the support of the first groups of tanks and to all the artillery, and for our part we are running dangerously to the last ammunition.

In the evening, after that is come to the Army forty tanks of the 21th Armored Division, provided by the Army Group Command, the situation on the front is as follows. The XXI Corps was in firm possession of all his positions. The XX Corps preserves the positions of the divisions and the 90th German and "*Giovani*"

Fascisti"(which were, however, taken from two battalions); reinstated to the positions of the entire division, "*Trieste*", where the fight was very tough and has cost heavy losses on both sides; He was not able to restore the front of the "*Spezia*" between hill 61 northwest of Jebel Roumana and hill 152 north of Gebel el Meida where an attempt to counterattack, carried out with the tanks of the 21st division mentioned above, for lack of infantry who consolidated success, has not reached the goal. The "*Spezia*" after hours of struggle is practically destroyed: its nuclei are still held here and there with desperate tenacity.

The enemy in a field day, which put a strain on his best troops, posted a limited tactical success that seen in its real proportions consists of a penetration of about 2 km. above a front of 3. But, for the precarious state of the army in all fields, for the leaden like burden the overall strategic situation (the enemy renews attacks in every sector of Tunisia), the lack of reserves of some consistency, to the almost complete exhaustion of ammunition, especially at the German artillery, the Army Group Command decides the withdrawal from the positions of the line of Chotts Skirra-Sebka en Noual-Gebel. This decision, which appears to have been taken by the Command Army Group until the morning, is communicated to the commander of the Army only at 20:00 engendering major difficulties for the communication of orders related to units and committed to the timely start of the vehicles, especially the western sector more away from roads.

This is the budget of the battle in which our troops have contributed a wealth of energy and launching value in the fight without hesitation and without reservation as had been ordered; they are authentic intercepted enemy radio communications, from which we learn that groups of Italian and German forces cut off, been deprived of the order of retreat, fought fiercely still the evening of the 7th current on those positions which had been entrusted to their defense.

3. - The further development of operations, and in particular the retreat that the Army is making, are forcibly linked to those of other troops and the overall situation in Tunisia: it is right that the mechanisms and modes of action are the responsibility and then regulated by the Army Group Command. Nevertheless, the Army Command has identified and explained in no uncertain terms, before and during the action, certain grave dangers of which it is going to meet with a withdraw technique which has been and is that so far adopted.

Faced with a ultra motorized Army, powerfully armor, highly mobile, as is English, accept fights thoroughly on subsequent lines that are located on average one

after the other 40 to 60 km. It seems in our view an expose our troops to subsequent flanking until total exhaustion.

Indeed there is between the thought of Army Group Command and ours, a diversity of views that has been repeatedly shown significantly, while remaining on our side deeply disciplined and loyal to the letter and spirit of the orders given by that command.

This diversity of views is not only contingent, but encompasses the entire conduct of the war at least against the enemy 8th Army.

This, for the reasons explained above for the relationship quality (technical) and quantitative against our troops, not approachable, with chances of victory, if not powerfully organized on lines that weaken the most remarkable ability to maneuver with counter attack our forces more mobile in the time of crisis. In order to these criteria he had proposed to accept battle at the bottom of El Hamma when the 8th Army, beaten on the line of Mareth, was going through a period of real crisis logistics, diluted as it was in the desert west of Jebel Ksour: in that fact, even in the case of a partial success, we would have bought time for more reinforcements from the Motherland. Instead it was decided to retreat to the line of Chotts, accept yourself for battle, when it was possible, without excessive expenditures, using the time that the enemy hath also given between the two battles, fall back directly to the line Enfidaville upon which to mass together with the troops taken from the other sectors of central and southern Tunisia.

The line of Chotts, unorganized, was clearly weaker than that of Mareth; this fact, in one with our handicapped efficiency, gave to this line character of compromise between wishes and possibilities of resistance. But because of it, the enemy, the evening of the 6th instant, he had achieved a tactical success, the criterion of a leap to Enfidaville, protected by sturdy mechanized rearguard with the task of performing a maneuver elastic, and therefore without the commitment of fighting in depth, could be advantageously if it is adopted.

Instead the retreat that has been implemented so far range from line to line, without the possibility of practical release, because the enemy, as well as stronger and even more mobile than we have already consumed several units in our fights partial without appreciable counterpart: a fact such conduct could only be accepted if it was to buy time for the benefit of other troops, outside of the army, which was made responsible for supervising the Enfidaville line and settle there in defense. But since such a fortunate circumstance we could not recognize in our case, and even taking into account the need to adjust the movement of the 1st Army with the subsequent acts of the operation of withdraw the individual elements along the Western Front, succeeds equally difficult to understand such a withdraw technique.

One might even add that the same situation the 5th Army the center and the north would have to strengthen the concept of a stronger withdraw and faster at least all the troops less mobile, with which provide the first line of basting extreme where the Army could face the enemy in better condition, that it will face the enemy, however reduced, with the decision and with the faith that has already demonstrated, consecrating to history, in the days of Mareth, of El Hamma and Chotts.

Z.O., on April 10, 1943-XXI.

The General of the Army Commander
G. MESSE

CONTROLLER OF THE 1st ARMY
General Staff

WITHDRAW FROM THE LINE OF THE CHOTTS AND DEPLOYMENT ON LINE
ENFIDAVILLE (7-16 April 1943-XXI).

1. -The morning of April 6, the deployment of large units of the army was essentially the one implemented after the withdrawal from the line of Mareth-el Hamma namely:

-XX Corps with the divisions "*Giovani Fascisti*", the German 90th Light, "*Trieste*" and "*Spezia*" between the coast and the area just northeast of the roadway for Gafsa;

-XXI Corps with the divisions "*Pistoia*", 164th German and Sahara Grouping between the roadway of Gafsa included and the *Jebel Akikina*.

The deployment of the few reserves of Army Corps and Army had been specially designed and implemented by me in connection with the conviction that the sector between the front and the road of Akarit Gafsa would have been (as it was) where the enemy He would have made the best effort. Under this criterion I had done deploy:

-the 200th Regiment of the 90th Division on the edge of the area between "*Trieste*" and "*Spezia*";

-the 361st Regiment, also of the 90th Division on the edge of the field of "*Spezia*" and "*Pistoia*";

-the 15th armored division, remained with 16 tanks, had already been ordered, on the eve of the battle, to move into the area Garaet Fatnassa on the back and in the midst of these reserves;

-also artillery Army had been deployed on the basis of having the highest possibility of intervention in the sector between the head and the road of Akarit Gafsa.

I summarized in my previous report, the flow of the battle of Chotts, characterized essentially by the following facts:

-violent action artillery and air enemies that come into action until the 23 hours of the 5th;

-strong attacks of enemy infantry in the expected sector, with partial failure by divisions "*Trieste*" and "*Pistoia*";

- restoration of the situation by counterattacks by reserves of Army Corps and Army in the aforementioned sectors;

- concentration enemy effort in the sector of the "*Spezia*" have attacked until the morning, with penetration in the right sector and divisional conquest of hill 61 (north-west of *Jebel Roumana*) and hill 152 (north of *Jebel Meida*).

The last light on April 6, the situation of the 1st Army from the west

to the east, it could be summarized as follows: Grouping Saharan not engaged, with a Battalion. in moving towards the area of "*Pistoia*"; 164th German division (three Battalion. + battery) had started the movement towards the sector "*Spezia*" division "*Pistoia*" committed throughout its sector, but in balance possession of his positions even at the cost of significant losses; division "*Spezia*" has suffered serious losses: its nuclei around some of its batteries defended doggedly against superior forces who pressed from every side; division "*Trieste*" strongly worn out in the fighting of the day during which, however, with the competition of the 15th Armored, had managed to drive the enemy troops back over the anti-tank ditch; the 90th Division remained with two Battalion in the line not pressed, had committed the regiments 361st and 200th (a total of 4 Battalion.) in counter attack of the day respectively on the front of "*Pistoia*" and that of "*Spezia*" (Gebel Roumana) division "*Giovani Fascisti*" in the line not pressed: two of his Battalion., however, had been taken away to move in the area of the "*Trieste*"; 15th Armored Division: completed the counterattack in the area of "*Trieste*" had also collected 40 tanks of the 21st after he made available of the army, had attempted an unsuccessful counterattack in the area of "*Spezia*".

The Army had fought hard, tenaciously!

Leaders and followers had appealed to answer any more energy to crush the enemy line of Chotts any progress; in front, but the preponderance of the forces of this, they could not stop him from making a tactical success, that, seen in the context of a battle of opposing armed, was obviously limited. Tactical success which, however, will have serious consequences for us for the lack of reserves needed to redress the situation on the spot. Nevertheless, true to the task received, the Army was stretched spiritually and materially in the supply of the battle to the bitter end, when the order came to retreat.

Indeed this appeared justified only by the special position of the army, also from the overall situation of our forces in Tunisia, however, the Commander of the Army Group at approximately 17:00, completed the interview he had with me at my command, was left without nod to me the likelihood of an immediate withdrawal, much less the way in which this withdrawal would be conducted.

2. -Said order came shortly after 20:00 hours, while at least a warning, I think, could have talked to myself a few hours in advance; detail that might seem minor now but that would have facilitated the transactions extent that it is difficult to imagine if it reflects the particular conditions of the Army. It was known that this was floundering in a crisis of vehicles too inadequate to the needs; oriented as it was to the idea of a battle to the bitter end, the line of Chotts, on which it was believed

having a good time playing the last card in a supreme effort, had taken all the vehicles for transport to work site of what was needed to fuel the fight and especially ammunition for the artillery that they were running out of their supply.

In the state in which they were our connections after hours of battle and aerial bombardment was undertaking a difficult one to convey the resulting orders to units almost all engaged in a tough fight, collect as many vehicles it was possible to have on hand and channel it in 'darkness of the night to the slopes just drawn and under constant aerial offense that throughout this cycle has had violence appreciable only for direct vision. Of course, if the Army command had been directed earlier, on a decision of such importance that overturned even our attitude, many other, more appropriate measures would be taken to break the contact and for road transport instead of our units that will be stowed as commodities on the few vehicles of much lower needs.

If the late hour when the order came was a source of justified apprehensions, and other more serious it bore the content of the same: it was evident that the Army Group Command sought to engage the army in fighting on successive lines close in offering free land to enemy armored mass, which had so far found limited employment opportunities, favorable conditions for the development of profitable operations in depth.

A similar process, it was clear, would lead to the next and gradual disintegration and destruction of our units, especially those less mobile, with the result to come no, or almost no troops on the final positions to defend.

In my opinion the retreat was aimed essentially to steal the units of the army as quickly as possible to reach the enemy armor mass implementing procedures maneuver elastic without the commitment of fighting in depth, it was easy to derive from the examination proceedings the same situation of the opposing forces.

From the line of Chotts that of Enfidaville run, as the crow flies, about 250 km. absolutely flat terrain, where you would seek in vain for a serious natural obstacle, usable for even just a stopping time at enemy columns, in fact, the vast plain at all compartmentalized even by vegetation and the crops, was an ideal environment for enemy use of massed armor, managing more than 400 in battle, as soon as he managed to come out from our positions on Chotts; massive armor that could find limits to its reach only contingent logistical difficulties in function of the increasing distance from the field depots, hastily brought forward, but that very reason he yearned for battle as soon as possible. The range of immediate

this mass could be easily appreciated on the basis of recent and past experiences: it is known, in fact, that the enemy tanks have a range of theoretical movement in varied terrain, which ranges from 80 km. for older types such as the *Matilda* tank from 20 tons, and 160 km. for the modern types like *General Sherman* tank from 31 tons; it is also known for past experiences constant, that no British armored unit, use move within range of enemy tanks if it has, at the time, at least half of the normal range, not to be caught in the crisis of supply in the most acute moment the fight: data seem of secondary importance, but they have always regulated the use of the British armored units and from which it can draw rule who should fight them. From this, and other factors that here is not worth the effort to list, it was reasonable to infer that to remove our non motorized troops in contract of enemy tanks, needed draw back a leap, truck carry them at a distance of not less than 100 km. from the line of Chotts and protect them while driving .with a mechanized rearguard that would slow down and hinder as much as possible enemy movement. In this way, in two or three days these troops could be deployed on profitable positions in the north of Enfidaville where among other things it was of paramount importance to first disposition of the defensive system.

It does not seem sustainable objection that a rapid withdrawal of the 1st Army would find out the flank and rear of the troops on the western front along Tunisia: it is clear that the withdrawal of these troops he needed to be carried out just as quickly as our and just for the same reasons, as the facts demonstrate later; it could also be by independent routes than those of the 1st Army: it was therefore to harmonize the two retrograde movements, giving greater speed to the mass farthest from the goals.

Instead the proceedings ordered by the Command of Army Group oppose fighting following the advancing enemy mechanized units ignored the operational capabilities of our troops already tried, massed on the few trucks that had been able to glean, many of which were those same services of the Intendenza, driven by civil conductors!

3. - Despite the difficult conditions first detected, the breaking of contact could be made less disastrous than might have been feared because the protracted fight had even enemy troops first row, while the armored mass still remained beyond our lines, he is moving in the midst of many difficulties, for the few openings still kept under the fire of our batteries rearguard, while the 15th Armored Division maintained contact with the enemies more mobile flow over our positions.

In the night and in the morning of the 7th, the positions allocated between Skirra

and the northeastern margin of Sebka en Noual were reached and over them were fielding (from west to east) the Sahara Grouping, the "*Pistoia*" division and Germanic divisions 164th, 15th Armored and 90th. The remains of the divisions "*Spezia*" and "*Trieste*", which for the inconsistency of men, weapons and vehicles could not be, on time, any element of force, were taken directly to Enfidaville initiate you to their reconstitution. The "*Giovani Fascisti*" division was transported directly to the south of El Jem for the opportunity to strike up the deployment of a range of intermediate and leap to the need that you had to make free for some time as many of the vehicles in order to better transport the remaining Italian forces (some of which were made to walk to the first stage) and repair the gaps that the RAF inflicted. It was providential that extent, then frowned upon by the Army Group Command, no one today, in the conditions in which it reduced the Army, could discuss!

The enemy tanks, emerged in the morning of the 7th from the sector of "*Spezia*" Division pointing right before trying to infiltrate, in the afternoon, along the eastern edge of Sebka en Noual. While the Germanic 15th Armored Division launched, with a few tanks remaining, to fight on the side, the enemy invested the full Sahara Grouping; while the R.A.F. violently bombarded throughout our deployment. The group that was siding, surrounded by tanks and pushed against Sebka, was destroyed, captured or dispersed.

Enemy infiltration, despite the counter-attack, continued toward the eastern edge of Sebka with the obvious intention to bypass the right flank of the army and stand between this and the DAK, deployed between the western edge of Sebka same and the southern slopes Jebel Bou Hedma. A decline of about 15 km., Is ordered, or rather imposed, the enemy pressure that now particularly interested in our division, "*Pistoia*" located to the right wing; the night of the 8th, while the Army runs the retreat, the "*Pistoia*" receives the full brunt of the massive enemy armor: three battalions, were able to fall back, the beautiful and strong division, which they had so heroically beaten on the positions of Chotts, they are overwhelmed and forced to retreat; artillery that preceded to the new positions could be saved almost entirely.

On the morning of 8 April, the remaining forces in line took deployment ordered between Rhedir er Rebaia and Sebkhet Oudrane. Other than some artillery, practically Italian forces on this line there are not more.

The command of the remaining forces (the 15th armored division, 164th, 90th with minor elements) is taken on by the XXI Corps, while the Commander XX moves back to Enfidaville to assume the command of the new line, has already been chosen and fixed in every detail by thr Commander of the Army Group.

On the afternoon of the 8th the Army forces are threatened again for retracting the right; he was ordained a new setback of about 35-40 km., on the line Mirabaud-Molinos-S. Antoine-Nakta is reached on the night of the 9th. In the morning of that day is finally the enemy to impose a setback stronger: the English 6th Armored Division, smashed the Axis positions in Fondouk, pointing in the direction of Kairouan-Sousse: the result is a serious threat on the roads of DAK and the 1st Army. As a result of this new element in the overall situation as serious, while the 5th Army trying to stem the invasion front, our retreat is more rapid and more decided to move north of the fracture line over Susa. In fact the movement is continued without interruption on the 9th and 10th, but, being taken in the mass enemy foul-mouthed from Fondouk, the 1st Army stops to the line and Hammada (southeast Susa) north edge Sebka Sidi el Hani, with defensive side between this and the Sebka Kelbia order to give time to proceed further with the eviction of important depots of Sousse. In the night on the 11th, now it acquitted this task, the withdraw goes on positions cheapest and strongest among Sebka Kelbia and the coast, continuing to cover the line of Enfidaville being first settlement.

The British 8th Army in the morning of the 9th, that is the moment when our retreat begins to turn without intermediate stops, it has already traveled a hundred Km. In varied terrain: its pressure slows; It is easy to see through his radio traffic the first symptoms of the crisis logistics, if not about the whole of the army, undoubtedly affects the armored units of the first row: these gradually lose touch with us as only meager outposts remain in view of our rear guard.

So the Army has reached the goal in precarious conditions and painfully fallen sharply in actual and in the media: painfully as a simple warning and a more prudent conduct of the withdrawal would offer the opportunity to carry back many more forces and could have been saved all or most of those who were lost on the first and second line rush.

In the 12th and 13th as the enemy in the plain with larger forces, our units withdraw, siding on the so-called line of Enfidaville organizing themselves to defend the position of strength, according to the trend imposed by the Command Army Group.

4. - Progress, which according to the original provisions, already known to this Supreme Command, included large tracts of ground and to a lesser extent included small mountains to gentle slope: on the one and on the other the action of the enemy tanks - even for the primordial state of the works and defenses incidental Could it take place in extreme ease, while at the back, at an average distance

12-13 km. remained unused heights naturally stronger and limiting the action of the tanks to the few and restricted areas. It seemed out of the question that in the current conditions of the army, low in men, artillery anti-tank pieces, tanks, ammunition and almost devoid of mines, we would have to "ally" the ground; with what we would have compelled the enemy to a battle preliminary infantry that are not for him, particularly after the days of Mareth, of El Hamma and Chotts, the greatest source of strength.

These reasons are shared by all the commanders of the great Italian and German units involved and including the Chief of Staff German from the 1st Army, I represented immediately Command Army Group, as soon as I was announced the trend line Enfidaville, suggesting that the position of strength on the line was switched Djebel el-Dib Sidi Bou Zid-Debbous- Djebel Kef en Naam -Djebel Feddane Adame el-Kef Nsoura-Mdeker-Djebel Djebel Rouine-Kalb-et Touil-Abid Djebel Djebel-el-Mania Hamadet Damous, cheaper and stronger than the one chosen by the said control; but this remained intransigent confirming the primitive order for the following reasons:

- Avoid the stress of the salient of XXX Corps, which include water intakes for the water supply in Tunis, it can not be set back;
- Better use of artillery from dominant positions on the plain below;
- Not to lose the advantage of a greater depth;
- Use the work already done.

These reasons, but the first that has some real value, appeared to me the order very theoretical and not enough to offset the risk that there would have been staying in the plains. In fact, in contrast to this risk does not tranquilize it a better use of our artillery, which will carry out mass action because of poor parts and ammunition, it the advantage of a depth that would be the ideal state for lack of forces, nor that absolutely Insufficient elements to anti-tank ditch who had reached inappropriate development.

I renewed therefore proposed correction which caused an inspection of the Army Group Commander who, convinced by what he could see "visually," he ordered the retreat position of strength limited the extreme right sector of the Army.

Then he was ordered by the commander of a retreat positions also in the field of Enfidaville.

In consequence of these successive adjustments, the current position of resistance represents an intermediate solution is not free from defects, such as the great development and the limited consistency of the work arose in a plane which has found obstacle in these continuous variations.

Which they have not failed to influence negatively on troops also for all those repercussions that are easy to imagine.

5. -Now the Army, given the forces arrived from the mother country (just over a Bersaglieri Battalion), of those who are hastily organized and reorganized, combining disparate elements everywhere subtracted, has approximately 35 battalions (including the Germans), fifty batteries and thirty tanks; It figures that even an approximation can take as an index of overall efficiency. In fact, with the exception of "*Giovani Fascisti*" Division, which is in fair condition, it is strongly depleted units of men, weapons and vehicles.

It should also be noted that the Army Group Command in appreciation of the overall situation has already removed the army artillery (so far four groups) and others requires.

All the troops have severe degree of fatigue.

My Command and commanders great unity, work with energy to give new strength, life, our faith in these departments who are forced to re-form the same positions entrusted to them: this is because the enemy is pressing and there is every indication that it would lose the opportunity to renew his attacks before our defense has taken on some significance.

Despite everything I am sure that the new strain and you are going to face the 1st Army will fight tenaciously and observe fully the delivery to resist to the end.

Z.O., April 16, 1943-XXI

The General of the Army Commander
GIOVANNI MESSE

MEETING MUSSOLINI - KESSELRING
of April 12, 1943

Mar. Kesselring: I was yesterday in Tunisia. I looked at the situation and problems of reorganization. I made arrangements for aviation agreement with his Excellency Fougier.

Von Arnim is going to leave an army on the right, one on the left, half the German Africa Corps; each Army would provide a Flak Division and an Air Force Command.

I have given orders about the problem of "eaters": either all or repatriate all combatants.

The situation since my last visit to you has changed. Unfortunately, my predictions have not come true. The fights were tough, even those of the retreat, and our losses were considerable. Now our forces are very weak and are weak on both sides and we add considerable shortage of ammunition.

I mentioned Excellency Ambrosio that is a matter of hours to our utmost effort to carry many unit to strengthen the fronts and create necessary mobile reserve forces.

Bad weather in recent days has allowed all transportation provided, and in air transport have had very considerable losses (40 aircraft). They should get new groups of transport from Germany, but unfortunately the problem is the time: you have to stop and heal the breakage. Even ammunition for the few remaining artillery should be transported immediately. I do not think we have a lot of time at our disposal. We run towards the full moon, reinforcements arrive from Gibraltar that make us expect more attacks and even some probable action of landing. All will have to fight with the utmost urgency and we must carry the necessary. Right now no means be left out.

Duce: Our forces are already on the Enfidaville line?

Mar. Kesselring: The retreat is in place. The line is strong in mountainous areas, in the weaker plain. We try to fill this deficiency with mines, a more suitable against the tanks.

North wing we have not had to fall as a result of attacks with tanks, but because of a line of about 20 km. we had four battalions and as a result some of them empty. The enemy has infiltrated our were surrounded and had to fight their way back to the positions and backwaters. We have to create a line of men.

Duce: We must carry: 1st -men; 2nd - artillery guns (Flak-Pak); 3rd -ammunitions; 4th - less fuel than once as a result of the lower need for movement.

Mar. Kesselring: Exactly, much less fuel.

Duce: I spoke at length with the Führer. You MUST stand up to what is possible.

The Führer gave an example: "Stalingrad". 22 districts of the city were in our hands, only two were left for the final occupation. The Russians have not given up, we had a reverse of the situation. We MUST resist not only until noon, but also up to a quarter after noon.

If we resist may create new strategic situations. If we give the Americans and British would free three armies beyond the French divisions. We MUST resist. This must be the only one thinking of the people on the spot; no hope, only that of resistance to the end. In this sense I have already given orders to Excellency Messe.

Mar. Kesselring: And these people we have to send help, we must do everything we can.

Duce: We do what we can. In recent times, only 50% of the ships arrived.

Mar. Kesselring: Of course, if we have air forces and Anglo-American ships there Strait can not count to convey large ships. You have to carry men and ammunition, and possibly with small means.

Duce: I see also the serious problem of the civilian population. There is a big difference between Tunis and Bizerte. We Arabs have a lower risk, we have the French who are all dangerous. We must carry out all those who are a burden, you must remove them. They should remain only the fighters, also in consideration of the problem of provisioning.

Mar. Kesselring: There are provisions for two months. We must create a defensive system of a line after another. And everyone must contribute.

Duce: Excellency Ambrosio has already given orders about it. The population is in danger, is an obstacle, is a burden as regards food etc. You have to hold on. The enemy is methodical, he is forced by the long time or by air strikes. The time he has absolutely no value. I am convinced that Americans will not do anything before you've finished the Tunisian question. Only then they will attack if necessary, Sardinia, Sicily, Crete etc.

If we can move the start of these attacks we will see that they not far from the beginning of winter will not do anything. In the summer yes, but.

In my visit to the Führer saw the correlation of all, I mean everyone, Keitel, etc. about the importance of Tunis. All possibilities can come true if we resist, and then we will keep.

Mar. Kesselring: So they need: men, munitions. And precisely now.

Duce: We in the African war we sacrificed our entire Navy, the Merchant Navy has had three quarters of loss. But what

no matter if we are able to carry men and munitions. I am willing to give all possible help.

Mar. Kesselring: I see the danger in Medjez el Bab. We need men. Today we have a new line. We must occupy one line after another. I have serious concerns for the next 5 or 6 days. I have concerns about transport. I had considerable losses. If I could carry at least suffered a regiment, the regiment 962nd is ready.

Duce: (addressing Excellency Ambrosio). If we decided, what cost is a destroyer for the front of Tunisia?

Etc. Chief: But later, for the events that will be what is left?

Duce: But we lose the same ports. And here we must assist immediately.

Mar. Kesselring: In my visits to Tunisia every time I see more that we need new forces, reserves for resistance.

Duce: we examine, we will promptly do everything possible.

MEETING MESSE - KESSELRING
of April 16, 1943

His Excellency Commander explains to Marshal Kesselring deployment that Divisions are taking on the position of your choice and mentions the differences of opinion with the Army Group Commander about the choice of the line.

Etc. Commander: We have not believed, or could, or wanted to choose from the beginning the line that was given by the Command of Army From the earliest days.

When little tired and troops must be sought in the completion of the ground forces. And then we know we have in front of the British 8th Army, full of armored and motorized, it was logical to think that they must oppose these means with terrain obstacles, in order to limit the areas of attack of the mechanized troops.

Expressing a personal appreciation, the only technical and professional without wanting to raise criticism to anyone, I think I can say that choosing the line passing through Enfidaville was a mistake, since that line had many weaknesses, the more who they had missed absolutely no time and means to organize a defense.

When the troops arrived there were only a few meters of anti-tank ditch, without wire and without mines. Through that line there were many opportunities for tanks to break-in. There was the area of Saouaf which constitutes a large area of facilitation for the mechanized means. For these reasons, I immediately proposed to choose a mountain line, but the Army Group Commander has decided not to accept this proposal, which was for more comforted by the unanimous opinion of all the commanders of Italian and German G.U. and the same German Chief of G.S. of the Army. Only after much persuasion the Army Group Commander decided to rectify the line by removing, at first, after surveys carried out along the valley of Saouaf and later (only the day before yesterday), approving an adjustment in the XX Army Corps. In this way they were lost 6-7 days that could have been usefully employed for the organization of positions. Without thinking about the tiredness of the troops forced to continuous movements for their inexplicable.

The Army in the Battle of Chotts and subsequent withdrawal, had many losses. On Chotts Army defended very bravely. On the evening of the battle to the enemy he had been only a small bag in the sector of the division "Spezia" but we had consumed everything we had. The artillery of Army and Army Corps remained with very few shots. Some departments,

that they had received in-time orders to retreat to the positions still fought for 2-3 days: there were between these Muller regimental units and "Pistoia" division.

The retreat was particularly difficult for the mechanism line to line, with subsequent stops, during which the units engaged the enemy that was to be getting stronger. Thus each line has lost something. I think (and it is always a technical opinion that express) that once decided the rush back was necessary to put more space between us and the enemy. Faced with an opponent mechanized the width of the cantilever it should be at least of the order of 100 km. Having, however, made changes to 35 km., It is derived that virtually the contact was never broken. Also, to save the greatest number of men and means, would have to receive advance notice of withdrawal. It would be enough that he had met the Commander of the Army.

The order of withdrawal is instead came when there was the troop movements taken from the field on the right, to fight back at dawn, and other movements of ammunition and supplies.

Just reached the new positions the Army announced the deployment and immediately reordering unit. When the troops who were in the rear divisions (90th, 164th and 15th Arm. who had behaved well alongside the Italian divisions) are indented in the lines, it has begun to complete the deployment. At this time the army is deployed as follows (starting from left):

-90th Division Germanic has its four battalions and two Italian battalions;

-division GG.FF. : 4 has its battalions and two battalions of the 90th.

In this area, taking into account the III battalion of the Germanic 47th regiment, which is available to the corps, there are, in the end, seven German battalions and 6 Italian battalions;

-division "Trieste" was very experienced. It has five Italian battalions (formations rather small) and a battalion of the *Luftwaffe*;

-division "Pistoia": it is the place of the "Centauro" from this morning at 08:00. And privately a division. It has its two battalions (with about 900-950 men in total) and two battalion formation drawn from elements of the "Centauro";

-164th Division Germanic has its two battalions, a battalion of the 15th and an Italian battalion. The latter is a battalion that was formation in the sector before Mannerini;

-division "Spezia": has five battalions, most in formation (the two divisions most proven in the recent battle are the "Pistoia" and "Spezia"). The sector of the "Spezia" is also reinforced with a Germanic battalion of the 47th Regt..

In the reserve there are:

15th Armored Division that now has very few tanks (yesterday it was four, is likely to increase);

-a battalion of "Pistoia";

-two battalion formations, made with aviation personal.

As for the artillery, the entire sector of the army there are, among divisional artillery, of Corps and Army, about 205-210 pieces, ie about 35% of what we had on the Mareth.

As for the ammunition you can count on, regardless of the arrivals of the past and present, of about one and a half *unfoc*.

Mine: the few that were there were so far been put forward to the line Enfidaville. This morning you start to place them in front of the new line. In the stretch of sea area adjacent to a thousand men he is working on the construction of the A/T ditch which can be completed in three days. Other sections of the ditch are under construction at corresponding to the roadway. It should intensify with the arrival of mines.

By the time the units left the line of Enfidaville, with some drums, to keep as far as possible the opponent. There will also be a safety line on the line of hills behind, to take away the opponent and prevent the observation and the deployment of artillery. It is hoped to keep these lines as long as possible. For the location of Takrouna, the Corps. It received orders to set up a robust stronghold with reserves of ammunition, food and water, such as to enable the resistance to the bitter end even if surrounded.

Mar. Kesselring: Regards the presentation. He says that the retreat in shock after it was made necessary by the fuel situation. It was believed that the English attack took place later and had not done so for fuel.

Etc. the Commander: I accept this explanation. But it imposed a condition: to save all the troops that they had the opportunity to make these changes after opposing the enemy. Against mechanized troops need mechanized troops. Troops transported with the Gondrand system are destined to disappear, in similar circumstances.

Mar. Kesselring: As the front had extended was not possible to bring back the troops moving. The DUCE, the FÜHRER and the Comando Supremo believed that the line of Chotts should be maintained.

Etc. the Commander: The line of Chott has done its duty in relation to the forces and the defensive organization in place. But you can not expect that a line consider organized after 5 days of employment.

The battle of Chotts was addressed by the 1st Army with 18 battalions and 40 batteries in less than it was at Mareth.

Tactically the battle of Chotts had not been won by the enemy on the evening of April 6. The next morning we could fight back. It had to choose; or make the leap back or groped the fate of the battle royal. But any infantry battalion led

on those lines later it was known that he was destined to be overwhelmed.

Mar. Kesselring: There was another solution: withdraw mobile troops and abandon to their fate infantry. Or save the one or the other.

Etc. Commander: We would then come to these positions with a third of what we still have today.

Mar. Kesselring: All this, however, belongs to history. I do not know sufficiently the new line. The line Enfidaville can deceive the enemy and force him to make a premature artillery preparation. The rear line is such that a break at any point can cause them to collapse.

Etc. Commander: The same would happen if you break the line of Enfidaville. Account should be taken of the forces have. The Army in a month that has not received a single battalion.

Mar. Kesselring: You can have your opinions in terms of tactics. The interesting thing is that you hang in there.

Etc. Commander: But just to make possible the strength you need to find a stronger position.

Mar. Kesselring: The DUCE has ordered that the line of Tunis is defended at all costs. You have to dig trenches placing subsequent orders of all at work.

Etc. Commander: Tell the DUCE and also to FÜHRER, if you believe that on Chotts you could not do more. Chotts the troops fought all day and inflicted losses on the enemy far greater than those suffered from it. But the enemy is rich and we are poor. This, however, does not diminish our spirit and our will to resist.

Mar. Kesselring: Where are held the positions is indifferent. The need is that you take. The experience of combat tells us that where there is no depth defense is inefficient and that, by contrast, the attacker uses his strength against deep positions.

Want to order that all who are in the rear are used for work. He will speak with the local commander of Tunis because every man that does not have a specific assignment is put to work.

Etc. Commander: This work, however, should be left to the bodies responsible. For Italian troops take orders and commands them Italians will perform. We have so far raked in 5,000 men for jobs, and they need tools. So far we have a shovel or a ravine for every three men and you must do three shifts.

Mar. Kesselring: tools will be brought by means of a torpedo boat as soon as possible. Mussolini asked me to tell you that will do everything possible to stock up.

The Army Commanders and Corps now they have all their attention on the line and can not waste time on what needs to be done back. Give orders to the organs that are in the rear

to use all men.

Etc. Commander: This is already being done. I have instructed the colonels.

Mar. Kesselring: He has not seen the trucks still under the olive trees.

Etc. Commander: But it may well be that it was a parking lot of trucks of inefficient repair. It should allow the competent bodies to work and have confidence in commanders, otherwise send them away.

Mar. Kesselring: It must be very energetic. We are in the fourth year of war. He sees gaps in Italian and German armed forces and the duty of senior commanders to help fill them.

Etc. Commander: I assure you that the 1st Army is a factory of inexhaustible energy.

Mar. Kesselring: I think so, but we must not forget that a fight six weeks can wear down the nerves. I was often in Africa and after every conversation with Rommel had the feeling that it had been fruitful.

Etc. Commander: As I said earlier is not about you. Tell the DUCE and FÜHRER that the army's energy there is for sale and that his captain will certainly be the last to lose.

Mar. Kesselring: I know no better message to the DUCE and the FÜHRER.

I was in Sicily where I could get that starts more. But a great commander can not go everywhere.

Etc. Commander: My energy the undertone in all. What is required is that you should send battalions, barbed wire, mines, ammunition.

Mar. Kesselring: We're used to always do with little. It's an honor for us.

It intends to clarify the issue of vehicles. He considers that the orders were poorly data and have tightened the minds, but there was no lack of desire in everything. It is the need to mobilize the batteries of Flak and to do that you need the vehicles that Italians are the only appropriate.

Etc. Commander: We have already given 58 trucks. I add that, for example, we have 5,000 workers who until now did not have a single truck for general services. Only this morning were given 5 trucks.

The Army is the first victim of a legend. When I was received by the Duce before coming to Tunisia, the Duce told me that the 1st Army had about 7,000 vehicles. But when I came here I found just 1,200-1,300. That is, however, 7,000 remained. Now all the Army does not have to 6-700 efficient vehicles.

You will anyway everything possible to give vehicles for those batteries. Only necessary that the Army Group leave us time necessary.

Mar. Kesselring, Speaking again of the line Enfidaville, states that it is to be considered good.

Etc. Commander: Yes, if we had had the ditch, mines, fence. We have few troops; If we lose these we have no others.

Mar. Kesselring: He told the DUCE that need ammunition. He declares now pleased to report that despite everything the 1st Army is safe to hold.

Etc. Commander: The Army will fight until the humanly possible.

Mar. Kesselring: The meeting between the DUCE and FÜHRER was clearly seen how the situation would be different if the Mediterranean Tunisia is no longer ours. In any case, you might never think to take away 300,000 men. And these certainly prefer to fight rather than be captured. The DUCE said, reported that everything will be done to send men and materials. Commanders understand, however, that the difficulties have increased.

p.c.c.

THE CHIEF OF THE OPERATIONS OFFICE

Lt. Col. G.S. Mario Revetria

MEETING MUSSOLINI - KESSELRING
of April 17, 1943

Mar. Kesselring: I traveled all along the front talking to everyone. On the right of our front we have a weakness in the North of Bab el Medjez, there are too few reserves. I asked the Führer again yesterday for a regiment and to my knowledge a battalion arrived today at 15:00 by air to Marseille, from where will keep going by air. As results from captured prisoners, the British did not dare to attack before the Goering Division considered it too strong. Further south is necessary to reinforce the front, infiltration of Moroccans has been eliminated. The line, as it is now underway, it is good. Only near the coast (Enfidaville) where we have the plain, we have a point a little weak.

Duce: How much is the width of the plain?

Mar. Kesselring: About 6 km. Von Arnim decided to move back the line a bit in this area, let alone of outposts that serve as scouts and to distract them on the fire of enemy artillery. Also is preparing a third line. For themselves the forces are weak, for a battle reserves are not yet sufficient; But we must say that every day now comes something. (The details have been shown on the map).

Duce: I think we have a few men; I think the forces are too weak. To my knowledge we have lost since the beginning of the battle, 19 battalions and 39 batteries. The forces now in place are about half of the enemy forces. I believe that there must be men! He had given orders that they were employed DD. and I believe that today two have made the journey, and came carrying about 700 men.

Mar. Kesselring, I have prepared 12,000 men in Italy.

Duce It is certain that without reservations we can not lead a fight. As I understand it from the Navy, lately they have been transported 26,000 tons of military goods, ammunition and fuel, and 1,400 men.

Mar. Kesselring: Yes, but men are Italian.

Duce: how many men have you transported by air?

Mar. Kesselring: 4 to 5,000 men. They should now reach from 1,800 to 2,000 men per day. Tunisia I have given orders that all people everywhere should get ready. I see three weaknesses: north of Bab el Medjez, south-west, where it was the infiltration of the Moroccan coast.

I predict the attack on the 20th as a birthday present for the Führer.

Duce: How's the second line?

Mar. Kesselring: It is not yet fully formed and it is yes so so.

Duce: We can therefore count on a second line?

Mar. Kesselring: Yes, even on a third.

Duce: You took the time to be able to do everything?

Mar. Kesselring: Not as you wish.

Duce: The enemy is?

Mar. Kesselring: We established the New Zealand troops on either side of the road and are these troops that carry out almost always attack. Our troops in front of them are good, we have the Flak and some armored units which remainder of the 15th Armored Division.

Duce: We will have time to prepare men, weapons, structures?

Mar. Kesselring: The workers are there but we should organize for the work of the fortifications of the other lines, we need tools.

Duce: The fire of enemy artillery currently disturbs our work?

Mar. Kesselring: North of Bab el Medjez works are not disturbed, south the British begin to adjust the shot as they have always done. If there will be the battle we may have some seepage, but if we can carry a regiment and other men, we can resist. Of course the enemy will attack at various points to increase our difficulties.

Duce: What say the commanders?

Mar. Kesselring: They are all convinced that the situation is serious, but they are all determined. Certainly a word from you would do very well.

Duce: It was given by me to General Messe; I did understand the importance of the situation.

Mar. Kesselring: you should do it at all on an agenda.

Duce: Yes, certainly you will.

Mar. Kesselring: The enemy will only happen if the artillery has in abundance and there where our lines have little depth.

Duce: In what area you can the tanks attack?

Mar. Kesselring: At various points (illustrating them on the map). The mass of enemy tanks is now south-west, but it may be that transfer them to the north.

Duce: What impression do you have enemy aircraft?

Mar. Kesselring: It remains calm, which is almost always a sign of impending great activity. I have already given orders to attack the fields and every night I do reconnaissance to find out in time if any concentrations of aircraft prior to an imminent attack.

Duce: The weather as you found it?

Mar. Kesselring: Good. I do not see very clearly still in the maritime situation, the means of landing are still in the very distant ports.

I think that the 20th you could have the beginning of an attack, and in the meantime we must do everything possible yet.

Duce: And the moral?

Mar. Kesselring: Good.

Ecc. the Chief: I beg to observe that it is not true, to me I know different. And I wanted to envisage the following agenda of yours.

Duce: General Messe wishes that I must do my order and I doubt I will.

Mar. Kesselring: I agree completely. But the General Messe had asked me, on my direct question, to report that the troop is tired but morale is good. Sure morale increases if the troops have the chance to shoot. So we must do everything possible yet. Certainly what we bring is always short and we need to think that guns are few and you have to shoot twice.

Duce: We will use the DD. again.

Mar. Kesselring: Yes, they will be used. We have to carry a regiment and still other reserves.

Duce: I think we did well tonight.

Mar. Kesselring: Yes.

Duce: Then they should also be ready to transport by submarines.

Ecc. the Chief: Within the month, but they will exist difficulties in navigation. *Duce:* And the air transport available to the Germans worked and work as I ordered? Sure we had losses.

SUMMARY MEETING HELD BY MESSE
April 17, 1943 at the Command XX Corps.

Present at meeting:

- Gen. ORLANDO - Commander XX Corp.
- Col. Ruggeri Laderchi - Chief of G.S.
- Gen. LA FERLA Commander division "Trieste"
- Gen. Boselli Commander division "GG.FF."
- Chief Of G.S. the 90th German division
- Chief of the Operations Office of the Army Commander.

Commenting on the withdrawal occurred, yesterday, two companies from the advanced positions of XX Corps., Excellency the Commander reaffirms the order that no command is authorized to order any withdrawal. Whatever the character of the next battle that the Army troops are going to engage it is understood that no unit, small or large, can fall without an explicit higher order. Also no command, that of the company, battalion, etc., Up to those of the Corps, can move back with his command if it is not authorized by higher command. Each command position must be considered a real last stronghold. No initiative, so as to refer to any setbacks.

Each group of artillery, each battery must be closed stronghold and must have its close defense. We were in Russia last summer, many examples of batteries or groups who resisted absorbing forces of the attacker. It happened in recent times that Italian and German units, fighting side by side, have received orders in conflict with each other. For example, in the area of "Centauro" Division there was a German company and an Italian company. At a given moment, the German company has warned that Italian had received orders to retreat. The Italian unit responded not to have received any order in this regard, but the German company has also withdrawn while the first remained in place. Shortly after the enemy attacked on the side the Italian company was completely destroyed. It may be that for reasons of connection or other reasons, a unit receives the order to retreat and the other not. In that case the best thing is all to stay in place. Recounting the incident just now I did not want at all to criticize the German units or Italian ones; I say this only because in combat is difficult to make themselves understood.

It was yesterday, at the commander of the army, Mar. Kesselring, sent by the Duce and the Führer. The two leaders were assured that everything possible will be done to help us by sending men and material. In any case

the delivery is that this bulwark must resist at all costs. In all it must be so determined to go through with it. The position of strength as well as time was defined to be defended to the last man. On the other hand we have to put our troops in the best possible conditions. More difficult the task becomes, the more we have to intensify our work to create the greatest possible well-being, material and moral, for the soldier.

We must treat the best use of land to enhance the chosen positions. The positions of the XX Corps. They are good. There is a most delicate part which is that in plan entrusted to the German 90th div. It is trying to improve with the construction of the ditch and we will try to improve it even more by placing mines and extending the fence if we do get the barbed wire and if the enemy gives us time. The commander of the army and that of the Corps. they know that it is a sensitive area and on it have directed their full attention. Even reserve troops are oriented so that they can be employed in this sector.

It should clearly define the function of the Enfidaville line, the safety line and the positions of strength. For this there is no doubt. As for the Enfidaville line, the idea of Army Group Commander, he must give much resistance to force the enemy to take sides. This will allow more time to be able to better organize the point of resistance. Of course this concept should not be brought up to the limit that can result in destruction of the units on Enfidaville line. And a poor evaluation done. The directive that I give in this regard is: oppose, but do not be crushed; does not come off the first press but even being destroyed.

The troops of the Enfidaville line must then fall back on the safety line. Meanwhile, this is a first step. And then the safety line must become so entrenched as to be able to entrust to the function which now has the line Enfidaville to make a real advanced position. We need first to keep the enemy away from the Enfidaville line, also to prevent the observation, and then prevent him from taking up the line of hills on which could establish its own observer, and on the rear of which could deploy its artillery. This line of hills (which is the security line) if organized and reinforced with elements that replicate, you can stop the attack.

All the artillery deployed on the location of resistance must be able to act in front of the security line. The 5 batteries that are currently ahead must then fall back behind the LS. Because the withdrawal of troops on L.S. possible it is necessary that they find on the positions they occupy a deployment already prepared (locations, connections, etc.), and which are fixed routes of withdrawal and that the new positions will be elements of the division commands to indicate to the troops to withdraw again to

their accommodation. There is the difficulty of the exchange of units of the 90th with that of the GG.FF. in the Enfidaville line: you will see what can be done; Meanwhile, we hear the opinion of the Chief of the G.S. of the 90th Division.

The Gen.ORLANDO, Commander of the Corps. It believes to operate immediately the exchange, to give unit control to each sector. His Excellency the Commander leaves it him to decide.

The Chief of the G.S. of the 90th Division is the difficulty of coordinating the withdrawal of units from the Enfidaville line. The companies of the 90th have agreed among themselves and also with the Italian companies deployed to the east that if a company has to fall back under pressure from the enemy, it will notify the other through a with motorcycle relay. The withdraw of the companies from the Enfidaville line may have difficulty because you can not predict from which direction the enemy attacks.

For example, if the enemy attacks from the east, the companies of the GG.FF. They must withdraw into the other sector.

Since, therefore, it is expected that these companies of Enfidaville line must fall back in a direction imposed by the enemy, he proposed to let them go right on.

His Excellence the commander says that he had already thought of this solution, but it is not possible to introduce it to not force the Corps to have the divided forces on three lines. It would face a weakening that would prevent making the maximum strength on P.R. Between the two evils (difficulty to fold the companies from the Enfidaville line the LS and remove forces from the P.R. from now) you should opt for less, facing the difficulties of turning in wards on L.S.

Hearing the opinion of Gen. Orlando and his Chief of Staff, His Excellency the Commander, given the function of the Enfidaville line and the chance to lighten the forces now are deployed, authorizes to remove 4-5 of 9 companies who are and bring them on the L.S.

Gen. Orlando objected that perhaps it is better to remove parts of each company rather than entire companies; His Excellency the commander responds that this is a suitable course of which may be decided by the commander of the Corps

The Chief of the General Staff of the 90th Div. that you can take advantage of this subtraction to operate the exchange between the elements of the 90th and that of GG.FF; His Excellency the Commander is the right proposal.

His Excellency the commander recommended, then, that all movements could begin at dusk and are completed before this night to avoid a crisis in case the enemy attacked this night, as it would seem from confidential news of prisoners. As for the batteries to take away or to leave first, the division commanders will have free will to decide

His Excellency the commander recommended to treat the efficiency of the connections with the companies advanced. Probably the wire connections that are destroyed during the fighting. There are only radio and brings orders. It is necessary, in any case, that the connections are always guaranteed. We need to know immediately what is going to use advisedly the few reserves that we have. Take care, also, more secrecy of communications, making extensive use of the conventional phrase book.

Keep up the morale of the soldiers. Talk to them. Explain the function of resistance. Fighting the enemy operates through its propaganda ago (recent launches of leaflets) to undermine the strength of our troops. Arguments do not miss: tell the soldiers behave as American soldiers, real "gangsters" of the war, and acts of cruelty they commit.

Bring the attention of Takrouna to be a cornerstone of which is given the task of resistance to the bitter end. If worst case the enemy could infiltrate our positions, Takrouna must remain and resist. Make haste to forge this cornerstone: the attack may come as early as today. As of today, then Takrouna must close and have a stronghold in itself water, food, ammunition, radios to resist to the bitter end. I would see gladly in Takrouna cornerstone of a German platoon. In that benchmark should be moved today by the 4 piece set. Captain Politi, commander of the I/66th, will be the commander of the stronghold which will be the "Makalle" of this campaign. If necessary resupplied by air. It would be good that the cornerstone was also equipped with a flag and a swastika that we could always see waving.

p.c.c.
The Chief of the Operations Office
Leut. Col. G.S. Mario Revetria

SYNTHESIS MEETING HELD BY MESSE

April 17, 1943 at the XXI Corp. Command

Present at meeting:

- Gen. BERARDI Commander XXI Corp
- Col. LEDDA - Chief of the G.S. XXI Corp.
- Gen. F ALUGI Commander division "Pistoia"
- Gen. SCATTINI Commander division "Spice"
- Gen. LIEBENSTEIN Commander 164th German division
- Gen. Richieri Commander artillery XXI. C.A.
- Chief of the Operations Office of the Army Commander

Gen. Liebenstein exposes the situation of the 164th German division:

The right wing still occupies the advanced line with the II/115th of 15th Division, in connection to the south with two battalions. A battalion is deployed at the turn of the roadway for Enfidaville. Behind yesterday came its fourth battalion (II/134th) which currently has ongoing work to establish a position of barrier south of S.i AEK in union at that mountain block where are the units of the "Pistoia". For work in the north of S.i AEK took a battalion complements that has so far only individual weapons.

Having his Excellency the commander asked when he hopes to have the weapons unit, says that tomorrow will begin to receive 10 submachine guns a day. But it must complete the arming of the other battalions.

Battalions currently available are: I and II battalion of 433rd Infantry Regt.; II battalion of 125th Infantry Regt.; I battalion of the 382nd Infantry Regt.; II battalion of the 115th Infantry Regt. (15th Arm. Div); 220th complements Battalion.

Artillery available are: a battery of his own division; two batteries of the Waltenberger Regt.; two batteries of the 15th Arm. Div.

Gen. Orlando adds that in the area of 164th and also in favor of it are lined up all the artillery of the "Pistoia". The security line currently has 1 1/2 battalion. Asked how he understood the function of the LS He says he would like to keep it as long as possible, because, once occupied, the opponent would have good game.

Indicates, then, work on the barrier that is in his sector making do with their division, at the thresholds, and consisting of walls and ditches. His Excellency the commander forewarns for

- Tomorrow after the dispatch of a thousand workers. He then asked Gen. Liebenstein news on the situation of the enemy.

Gen. Liebenstein exploring patrols reports that have come down to

2 Km. from the advanced line found still clearing the ground from the enemy. A platoon of the area said that last night was an de Gaullist officer in the area. Also he saw the black soldiers. From the slopes of Dj. Fadeloune shoot running shot noise on the roadway. Before closing its exposure Gen. Liebenstein still communicate that in his sector is used I Group Flak with 9 pieces and 20 machine guns of 20 mm.

Gen. Scattini, Commander of the " Spezia ", explains the situation:

The line assigned to the division is divided into two sectors: one entrusted to German Colonel Buse and a Colonel Chiaramonte.

In the sector of Buse is deployed I/125th reinforced by a machine-gun company and a battalion of two A/T companies (106th battalion). In total, in that area, there are about 800 Italians. It follows the German battalion of the 47th regiment. And a particularly strong battalion which has the following strengths:

- 32 Official
- 164 NCOs
- 1184 Enlisted men
- 40 Light machine guns
- 15 Heavy machine guns
- 3 Heavy machine guns antitank
- 10 Heavy mortars 150
- 3 Cannons A/T of 50
- 9 Cannons A/T of 76.2
- 7 Light guns for Inf. of 75
- 2 Heavy guns for Inf.. of 105
- The A/A auto-cannons of 20.

Following the III/126th that has been reconstituted and is reinforced by two machine-gun companies.

As for artillery he has: 212nd group 75/27 of 10 pieces, 208th by group 77/28 of 6 pieces, in 213th by group 100/17 of 4 pieces (will be soon brought to 8 pieces), a battery of 105/28 4 pieces, two batteries of 65/17 (one of 4 pieces and one of three pieces, one of three pieces will go to the "Pistoia" division). Today also will be in a group of 88 Flak.

The battalion engineers is full, as are full services.

So far lack the ammunition for the group to be 77/28, because due to a mix up had been sent to the XX Corp.

His Excellency the commander draws particular attention to the need to end similar disadvantages: it is a crime to miss the ammunition.

Gen. Falugi, Commander of the "Pistoia" division, explains the situation in his division:

He has two battalions: the 340th machine gun Battalion and the group

"Novara". This last has 430 men with 28 machine guns, six machine guns, 3 mortars, , 7 pieces 47/32, 3 machine guns 20.

His Excellency announces that the commander ordered the completion of the group with cavalry personnel. The personnel of infantry which had become so available will be transferred to the Battalion. the 350th Inf. is in the sector of the 164th Div. and currently it has a very small force.

Besides these two Bns. in the echelon, the div. being set up, back, a target point with the Battalion. 36th Inf.. This Battalion. currently has five mortars, but they receive another 6 in reinforcement and will also have a battery of 65. And at present also a anti tank company of 20 of the 31st Tank Battalion. This Battalion. currently has two companies with a total force of 80-90 men. Two other companies are in constitution at the base. It will be reconstituted the 11th/35th and, with elements of the 132nd. A/T Regiment It will be reconstituted 11th/36th It takes, however, still a bit of time. The Engineers and services are in place.

His Excellency the commander notes that the "Pistoia" has a very limited sector but with the flank vulnerable sectors. The commander of the div. considers that fact. Provisions should certainly reinforce the flank position to make more intimate bond with the "Trieste" division.

Once the report of the commanders of the divisions, the Excellency the Commander is also here the arguments already treated at the XX Corp.

"It was me yesterday from Mar. Kesselring, sent by the Duce and the Führer, to realize the situation. He repeated to me that in this bastion where we were really must be resisted at all costs. No person is authorized to give orders to retreat to small or large units, even under the overwhelming enemy pressure. Everyone must stand on site. Revise, if necessary, the command post of the divisions, bearing in mind that should be under, if not ordered. Each command must be and remain a strong point. As everything should collapse, around the division commander will still fight.

Living between units. All commanders, during the day will move among the ranks. The troops are tired. And the same that so long fights and walk and could not have all that would be desirable. Treat soldiers spending much everything you need. Take care good rations. I ordered to the Intendenza to distribute half a liter of wine a day and seize cattle to provide fresh meat to soldiers. Recall in this regard that we have only 4 days even reserve rations: it is therefore necessary to economize tins and biscuits. There remains the problem of the outfit. 30,000 uniforms, which were sent from the country went to the bottom. We hope that the country can still provide others and get them. The situation is however improving ammunition.

Recommendations are useless for defense. We will make the wall. The British have adopted the tactic of "artichoke" gnaw one positions

at a time and then form the base for the breakthrough of the tanks. We must not give the enemy time to do so. We must confront immediately, counterattacked immediately. Give bite to men. Strongholds are closed and equipped with everything: ammunition, food, water.

I approve the work he is doing Gen. Liebenstein. The other commanders of divisions will look behind to see what work is needed.

The situation is such that the enemy can attack at any moment. Take this into account execution of the work: workers have the weapons are nearby and made frequent experiments alarms. At night the scan is sent to the far forward as possible and daytime observation is intense. Whenever the enemy is installed on a position and bother with observation alone must be hit hard with the artillery."

p.c.c.
The Chief of the Operations Office
Leut. Col. G.S.. Mario Revetria

MEETING VON ARNIM-MESSE
of April 21, 1943

Present at the meeting: General Mancinelli, General Mattioli, General Gause, General Bayerlein.

Gen. Messe. Is read to General von Arnim a message received by Captain Politi, commander of the stronghold of Takrouna. He announces that he has ordered a daring company to go to Takrouna. It will bring with them even ammunition.

Gen. von Arnim. If we resist again tonight, tomorrow and the next night, that is, for more than 36 hours, the worst is past. The British will be forced to stop the serious losses incurred.

Gen. Messe. Eavesdropping is that all the attacking troops have done this have had substantial losses. Returning at Takrouna, if the 70-80 daring that I sent you will get, they will still only give a few hours of life the target point, which is attacked from all sides by superior forces and pounded by artillery.

Gen. von Arnim. It is necessary that our artillery aid. *Gen. Messe.* Our artillery to help in every way.

Gen. von Arnim. What is the situation of the artillery ammunition? *Gen. Messe.* This morning, all over Tunisia (therefore including those at the units) there was one *unfoc*. But we must take into account the intake of the day. I ordered to go soft on the consumption of ammunition, firing only when it is really worth it.

Gen. von Arnim. You can take away ammunition from divisions not attacked.

Gen. Messe. As for artillery ammunition equalization makes the Command artillery.

Continuing in the exposition of the situation: the DJ. Bir was busy yesterday soon enough and has compromise some employment of Takrouna. Our contact should be now to Dj. ech Cherachir where the British facing the II/47th which occupied the DJ. Bir.

Gen. von Arnim. They are small hills that do not matter. *Gen. Messe.* Yes, but I do not want the enemy to gnaw at our positions.

In this area, in the end, the line of resistance has not been affected, except at Takrouna, we do not know yet what will resister. In the area of "Pistoia" the enemy was driven back from all positions except by Dj. el Blida. The order that the Army had given yesterday stated that the troops had counterattacked

record everything, but the commander of the Corps, pointed out that the troops are tired and suffered many losses. Now we have nothing behind. Everything has been carried out, including a few elements gleaned of the "Centauro". The troops have performed very well and many officers have fallen at the head of their units.

From the point of view of the situation which is nearly 48 hours after the start of the battle you can declare satisfied and pay tribute to the troops and commanders who accepted to die on the spot. It is to be expected now that the enemy would try to exploit the success reported in the local sector of Takrouna. There are two solutions:

-the first is to fight back tomorrow morning (not before) with a column moves to take over the DJ. Bir and another advancing on Dj. el Ogla to fix the enemy. But for this there is available a combat group of the 90th which has little: two companies of grenadiers, a fighter company and a pioneers company. But there's another problem: once DJ. Bir occupied must keep it. And the action on the whole it is not easy, due to the presence of a lot of English infantry, and which, however, is linked to the condition that takes into Takrouna until morning;

-the second solution is to move back, with the deployment, straightening. It is not an idea that should scare too. Moreover for the Army Group, the resistance line was already passes; It was the Army that he wanted to stay on to earn a few days.

Gen. von Arnim. If we retreat before tomorrow or tomorrow night, we offer a feeling of success to the enemy.

Gen. Messe. I am well aware, as I am resisting the pressure of my Staff, but I must also take account of his right proposals. Here we have troops that are to bring back heavy weapons, which, under the pressure of the enemy, is always a problem. And if the enemy seizes Takrouna it is even less easy. In addition, the III/47th, which is fighting for two days, is a bit 'worried and does not consider it anymore. I asked the General Bayerlein talking about it with the commander of the battalion.

We can try to resist more than we can on the positions currently occupied and then bring it back when it is absolutely possible to keep. We have to think but also to the nature and quality of the troops who patrol the current positions. There the battalion "M" resulting from the merger of two battalions; There the battalion *Luftwaffe*, having a lightly armed and that, in essence not much of a battalion. If there was a battalion of another German division things would be different. The commander must take into account all these conditions.

These positions have been all day under concentrations of artillery that had also intended to prohibit any aid to Takrouna. I had also thought to take away Battalion

of the 15th which it is with the 164th and replace it with a company of the II/47th that is deployed in the "Spezia" sector and that is very strong. There is no other solution.

Gen. von Arnim. You can change II/47th with III/47th, working by platoons.

Gen. Messe. I do not think there will be time.

Gen. von Arnim. What is your opinion on the future development of events?

Gen. Messe. The enemy will continue to attack. It continues tonight especially if it managed to get hold of Takrouna. So far the enemy has attacked only with the infantry, keeping under carts and motorized infantry waiting to be created the situation favorable for entering the tanks. He has so far attacked from all sides but the tanks failed to break through. These are reported almost everywhere but if the infantry does not open the way you can not get them to act.

Today it has been possible to establish exactly the enemy camp: to the east is the 1st Armored Division; around Takrouna's division forgave; Then there is the 4th Indian Division with an armored brigade; Finally, the 7th Armored Division and an armored brigade. This last unit we secure items.

Gen. von Arnim. I am of the opinion that it is not advisable to fall back to not give the enemy the feeling of success.

Gen. Messe. I repeat that I am opposed to any kind of withdrawal. I gave strict orders because no fold. I indeed ordered to move forward commands. But when a unit that occupies a certain position is forced to retreat under the irresistible pressure of the enemy, it is clear that the commander can not allow this setback to happen chaotically. It is also necessary that the commander then fixed a new line on which to stop. This however can not be called a retreat.

Gen. von Arnim. I fear that with the retreat losses increase.

Gen. Messe. We say to resist to the last man, but you can not get the entire execution. It would however make it clear that so far no one has given orders to fall back and no one will. The commander, however, has an obligation to study the various solutions and in this case I represent the Command Army Group who is a judge to make its decisions.

Gen. von Arnim. How long it can stand the rest of the line once Takrouna is lost?

Gen. Messe. I do not think much. And then we envisage future development of events. Every hour that passes we consume what little we have and we do not receive any help or in men, nor in means.

Gen. von Arnim. If we give something to the enemy too soon we give an impression of our weakness.

Gen. Messe. But we have to put troops in the best conditions to object.

Gen. von Arnim. If we can keep Takrouna the situation does not change much. If Takrouna is lost we must take these positions as much time as it takes to deploy back heavy weapons; possibly within the day. It will be possible to strengthen these forces changing II with III/47th. I will try to bring out the regiment

"Menton" and make it available. Tonight he pulls out the General Staff and three companies; tomorrow night another two companies. And good troops on which you can rely. Then it must still examine how to strengthen the *Luftwaffe* battalion. We should see to strengthen Takrouna.

Gen. Messe. We took the three best units who have behaved magnificently. The English have paid very dearly for their attack. I would like the balance of the following days ends as yesterday as today. The British announced that they have won Enfidaville; there was not even one man.

Gen. von Arnim. How can I help you?

Gen. Messe: Be necessary troops, aviation, ammunition! Let the war of the poor against the rich. It's a great honor but it is not very convenient.

Gen. von Arnim. I firmly believe that we will have gained a lot of time if we will gain another two days. Then we will have time to regroup because the enemy will have to waste so much time to reorganize a whole new attack.

This is truly a war of fortitude and also the British if they are convinced. Every day that we resist more is a day gained for the defense of Europe. And every bomb thrown in Africa is less than falls on Europe. I hope that even the simplest soldier understands.

Gen. Messe. Everyone understands and therefore fight well even if they are tired. And this fatigue we must see it, understand it and try to do what we can to overcome. We think that there are soldiers with no tent, no shoes, no clothes (a ship carrying 30,000 sets of clothing was sunk) and yet they fight and fight well.

The organization of coastal defense and anti paratroopers is well advanced. Units in coastal defense itself there is not much. But there are already four mobile units under the command of Gen. Costa comprising 3 sectors, having a one spare.

There is an array of artillery. Now we are forming, at the Instructions Center, a machine-gun battalion for coastal defense.

Gen. von Arnim. The important thing is that any alarms are known in time.

Gen. Messe. Is going to be organized around a system of multiple connections: telephone, radio, light signals (links for the flanks),

motorcyclists. If we still have a few days time the organization will be good. Each mobile unit will have armored cars, 47 pieces, 20 machine guns and two batteries 75. The three groups are located so you can make mass in one point.

He was interested in coastal defense also the Instructions center, whose commander was responsible for a part of the coast.

Gen. von Arnim. He asked whether General Costa is in connection with aviation to ask this reconnaissance on alarm.

Gen. Messe. He replied affirmatively.

Appendix n. 42

1st ARMY COMMAND
Operations Office

No. 3691/Op. Prot. res. staff.

P.M. 11, On April 26, 1943

Subject: Action of command.

To the Commander XX Corps.

To the Commander XXI Corps.

I had occasion to say repeating my satisfaction on the behavior of troops and command in the recent battle of defensive Enfidaville which closed after three days of hard fighting, to our absolute advantage.

However, in order to draw from the experience of every day because of improvement I think now appropriate to highlight some of the shortcomings of detail that is absolutely necessary to eliminate.

I refer especially to the personal action of the commanders which must be considered under two different aspects, equally important.

The commander pinned the eyes of the lower, especially the troops, who by his words, by his demeanor, the same facial expression derive comfort to harden the resistance or may be inclined to doubt, to waver, to fall. It must therefore, under this point of view, that each commander to the necessary energy and clarity of the orders have associate not only corresponding firmness of the way, but also and above all outward demeanor such that each lower elevation reason there has for its spirit.

The commander is also responsible to provide the Comando Superiore every possible element of judgment on the situation, through reports as much as possible detailed and objective. The action command of the Comando Supremo necessarily depend largely on the timing and the accuracy of such reports when it is not possible to achieve a sufficient degree of objectivity of the news from the beginning, where the influence of the emotions of the battle is difficult to avoid, require at least that the interim controls, with the comparison of reports, with the knowledge of their employees know examine them peacefully, by correcting the distortions original, easily recognizable to the expert eye of the master.

Only then is it possible to represent situations equally devoid of optimism both unfounded (incomplete knowledge of the events)

and excessive alarmism (retransmission unfiltered impressions of the first line).

On one point necessary to draw the attention of the commanders of all ranks.

Our opponent has now elevated to the system the start of his attacks at night. Apart from other benefits from this procedure promises (approach unnoticed, surprise, reaction of artillery, etc.) There is an advantage which has each time proved to be able to rely very shrewdly. The development that, even at night, a few even modest initial success (in which an attack can not occur) in order to arrive before dawn reinforcing a win-win situation, that certainly put in serious difficulty the opponent.

At some point during the night the enemy attack seems to stop, while in fact continues to go somewhere insidiously undermined from the start, escaped the control of the commanders of the front line. Only in the early morning you can see that the enemy, which at first was considered to have completely rejected, is in reality master of strongholds and positions of great importance, and that to dislodge must now organize complex actions counterattack.

It needed a more strict sense of responsibility on the part of the unit commanders of the front line, so as not to recline in an easy persuasion that nothing happened.

Such persuasion and the consequent communication to higher command can not and should not rely on the fact that no negative enemy raid was reported in the stretch of their respective competence. On the contrary, it is not justified to what is not confirmed by the positive control and safely on each element of the face. Must be debt of honor for each captain, especially at this early stage of the fight, do not neglect any means to achieve a secure knowledge and without gaps of their situation; just so you can put away, even within the counterassault or perhaps only with a vigorous reaction to fire, in situations that a few hours later may compromise the safety of the entire line.

Although I know the difficulties of a complete orientation of the situation first-line, especially at night, and while knowing the plight of links, I believe that through proper orientation of all intelligences and all will in this way we can, and then it must, achieve a positive result in this field. It is first necessary, therefore, that all the commanders of all ranks, are enlightened and convinced of this need and are given the responsibility that goes with it.

The Army Commander
General GIOVANNI MESSE

COMMANDER 1st ARMY
General Staff

REPORT ON THE BATTLE OF ENFIDSVILLE (19 to 30 April 1943)

1. -at the beginning of the withdrawal from the line of *Chotts*, the night on April 7, for how much faith I could have the fighters of the 1st Army, that - I was sure -it would be beaten with the same value already enshrined in previous battles, I could not hide the seriousness of the situation: these our brave, brave, tireless soldiers forced into a war of maneuver in open ground, for which it did not have the appropriate resources it weapons for retaining masses enemy battleships would inevitably tended to go into irreparable losses, whether in translating into action the orders of Command Army Group had not given the material possibilities of the instrument to my orders and the need to put up maximum resistance where this could have been addressed in much more favorable.

Based on these criteria and was heading out of range of enemy tanks "*Giovani Fascisti*" division and the remains of the divisions "*Spezia*" and "*Trieste*", and gave order to provide that was pushed to the maximum rate the reorganization of units however withdrawn from the line or from the rear, as well as provision of new units constituting them with any element was designed to handle a weapon. From what I could not fool myself that the forces leading to the new battle, as the Army, the withdrawal from Tripoli on, he almost always drawn to replenish their ranks decimated, these elements behind the lines that could not be a inexhaustible reservoir; but with the call to battle even the least acts, with giving them an hour serious proof of unconditional trust, I promised myself especially in magnify every man of the Army that spirit of heroic resistance that we had come always on the front lines.

This obscure work conducted with faith and energy has been good really positive: on the heights of the *Garci Jebel* backline units, hitherto used in coastal defense, consisting of elderly, less valid, give magnificent proof of steadfastness against the excessive power of the enemy and even exceed the 'expectation of who knows and knows how to thoroughly assess the inexhaustible moral strength of our people.

To translate into figures the forces on which he could count at the end of the retreat, including German units and recoveries from backline, I will say that they could be assessed in 35 battalions, about fifty batteries and 1/2 tank battalion; if faith commander wanted and would rely on the spirit of sacrifice of these troops, the eye

the technician could not escape all the gaps which they suffered; the comparison with the enemy forces who were preparing the new shock, perhaps decisive, left no doubt thoughtful. "But for what the fight was to be accepted with extreme decision calling all to concur.

2. -I represented, in other previous reports, the events for which has passed the definition of the line of resistance on which the 1st Army fought the first phase of the battle for Tunis; I indicated in detail the line that I have proposed, as well as subsequent adjustments granted by the Command Army Group over its ordinary plans.

According to these corrections, the front of the army was to assume a trend arched subsequent discussions between the coast and the offshore Takrouna between it and the *Jebel Garci*, and finally between *Jebel Garci* and *Jebel Gib* around the basin Saouaf. Essentially three fall: two extremes-width, one less central, leaning against the salient of Takrouna and *Jebel Garci*.

Fundamental concept of defense should be to prevent the enemy to create, with the conquest of the two main aforementioned, the conditions necessary for the use of his armored masses deeply freeing them from our action of fire on the flanks. It is true that the enemy could revert to the criterion expensive and daring to commit one or both salient and groped the breakthrough of our improvised defenses in one or both within the coastal and central; but such an action would have been for him burdened with many unknowns. On the other hand, an essential feature of conduct in the use of wagons enemy has always been the prudence; It is not the place of analysis to discuss whether this is due to temperament of thoughtful leaders or doctrine: the fact is that the enemy has so far sought success rather trusting in the absolute superiority of the means rather than the development of dangerous maneuvers. In any case it agreed to strengthen us in the best way and give strong weight to the employment of the aforementioned highlights against which the impact of enemy infantry was inevitable.

As of April 18, the eve of battle, our units were deployed as follows:

-XX Corps with the remains of the German 90th divisions, " *Giovani Fascisti* " and "*Trieste*" between the coast and the *Jebel Garci* excluded;

-XXI Corps with the remains of the divisions "*Pistoia*", German 164th and "*Spezia*" between *Jebel Garci* and *Jebel Gib* (west of the Saouaf basin) on which the Army made contact with the DAK (5th Army).

Despite the effort to increase the units of the army waiting for the feverish work of reconstruction and reorganization would give more fruit, it was necessary to deploy all available units on the line to ensure a minimum of consistency. It could be withheld

Army reserves in only the 15th Armored Division, however, reduced to about thirty tanks, half in repair, and two battalions, forces that were located in the central area than the most dangerous lines (coastal road, Enfidaville - Zagouan road).

The few artillery of the army were arrayed with the criterion of having the highest possibility of intervention in correspondence of the two salient mentioned above and so that at least an part could intervene well in extreme sectors of the army, with particular regard to the sector coastal. Based on these criteria the mobile artillery will be grouped into two groups during the course of the battle will act in perfect fit with our infantry. Modest to the said date proved the consistency of works and defensive field structures: for the deficiency of materials, of mines, of workers that will be continuously attacked by the RAF, and finally to the impossibility of implementing a plan of work organic consequence of variations to the position of strength that the Army Group Command allows for later.

It should be noted however that the work carried out on the plain according to the original orders, especially in the coastal sector, will not completely lost: they serve to protect in the first place our security line and to mislead the enemy as against this line will organize a real attack of tanks and infantry destined to fall on deaf ears to his surprise and unavoidable disorientation.

Proof of the facts and after the first sustained heavy fighting, the advantage of our defense will be essential to have prevented the enemy a chance to spread in depth with his armored masses; our infantry at Takrouna and *Jebel Garci* felt that mastery of the two pillars was essential to our defense: compared with the British infantry, men against men, although outnumbered, though less thoroughly and modern armed, stood firm and they launched into a bitter struggle, tenacious, bloody renewing these African heights generous impetus of our race.

3. -This first phase of the battle for Tunis crosses between two distinct phases: the night on the 20th current to the morning of the 23rd it has "the great battle", if we stay with the definition that gave enemy commanders and British soldiers as it is seen from the diaries of prisoners; then the fight will fall off and it is almost all confined to the coastal area, where the enemy, always rejected, urges again decisive blows against our positions advanced in the area of security.

In the first half of the battle the enemy pursues essentially the conquest of three objectives:

- the our alleged positions of the coastal area between the sea-Enfidaville- Takrouna,

- the salient Takrouna,
- the salient of *Jebel Garci*.

The battle begins at 23:00 of the 19th with the usual massive artillery preparation.

In the coastal zone, the English 50th Infantry Division, that previous battles have sorely tried, moves the attack supported by a entire tank brigade, probably the 8th; but come close to the anti-tank ditch not find that a few of our patrols which retreated to the hilly cord that runs along on the front of our position of strength; on this until the night before, had withdrawn the divisions "*Giovani Fascisti*" and 90th.

The enemy is undoubtedly disoriented: stops and pushes forward tentatively exploring their mechanized elements against which our troops forward position begin a series of skirmishes and then fighting for more substantial delay the identification of our positions behind.

Character far more bitter, from the first moment, the struggle takes in the Takrouna, where the enemy attacks the summit of our salient from the south, east and west.

When inspecting our defensive system was from my appeared immediately the importance that could have, in the general economy of the battle, the height of Takrouna (highly advanced and almost detached from our positions back standalone) if converted into the target point with autonomous function acting to break the first rush of the enemy attack and to channel it towards the falling coastal and central. To this end, I ordered because the garrison could hold long though completely bypassed. Convinced also that a great strength of character was essential for the defenders did everything. For this reason the whereabouts emulation with the inclusion of a German platoon between the troops of the defense and, in order to give strength to the bitter end, provisions for delivery to troops Italian and German battle flags entrusting the defense laurel honor of fighters.

Here is the letter in which General La Ferla, commander of the "Trieste" division I gave notice, on 18 April of delivery:

"No. 1203 Op. Of prot.

Z.O., April 18, 1943-XXI

"To his Excellency Army General Giovanni Messe"

Commander of the 1st Army.

"This morning in the name of your country and the presence of a representative of the army garrison Takrouna, I handed over the flags to the commander of the Italian and German strong point that made a commitment

that they will be defended to the last man, as your delivery.

The commanding general
F. LA FERLA."

The garrison of more than Takrouna The I battalion of 66th infantry and Germanic platoon mentioned above, also included a section of 65/17 and a section of 87/6 war booty of the 16th R.A.C.A.

The preparation of enemy artillery, violent, lasts from 23:00 hours of the 19th until 06:00 next day when the enemy infantry supported by tanks move to attack the front-Takrouna Djebel Bir-Djebel Djebel Cherachir-Froukr.

The attack was so violent and fueled by the influx of fresh forces near the German stronghold of *Jebel Bir*, after a brave resistance, is overrun; with the fall of the enemy, it makes sure the stand for the push from southeast attack and to climb Takrouna.

But our defense, ably supported by artillery *on site* and those of Army Corps and Army are holding firm in the face the pressing tide that now envelops the entire upstream even from the southwest, where the precise focus of our machine guns reaps massacre in enemy ranks.

Around 09:00, after a violent melee, our positions in the southeast are overrun: the enemy infiltrates up on top of the mountain in the tiny village above it, where the battalion commander with a few command elements leads a counter assault to repel the attackers.

This situation would be untenable in the face of enemy tide that covers mostly from New Zealand's 2nd division, where new forces were not sent to Takrouna. Knows the on the share, surpassing violent enemy artillery barrages, the battalion formation "Folgore" to the first at 14:00 hours with the grenadier company and then at approximately 16:00 with the other two paratroopers companies.

With the classic momentum of our finest shock troops, the battalion "Folgore" flush from house to house the enemy, then urges him from rock to rock, it throws down the east slopes of Mount regaining all the lost positions; the raid lasted for several hours and only to the first light of the 21st can be said to be completed and the situation restored.

But the enemy does not desist from the purpose of occupying Takrouna. After a violent preparation, fresh forces are launched in ever new attacks.

From 17:00 hours of that day, the furious battle raging on the mountain is more intuited that followed as it lacks any direct communication, but it has no respite.

The same enemy that gives first time to the position occupied and then denied the news, is puzzled by the fierce resistance

individual group who prefer death to surrender.

The struggle of episode in episode lasts all day of the 22nd and into the night on the 23rd.

Only in the early hours of that day, the enemy remains in control.

But at the price of what sacrifices! Itself confirms that the losses were enormous and it has no strength to carry out new attacks.

In the field of Takrouna the battle is over.

During the attack of the enemy Takrouna salient unleashes the field against our "Pistoia" division placed to defend the *Jebel Garci* salient. Against these worn our battalions, British and Indian infantry of the 4th Division, supported by the mass of artillery, deployed close to the *Jebel Fadeloun*, move to the assault of our positions *Jebel Hajar el-Djebel Azreb Blida-Kef en Nsoura*. Since the attack struggles to proceed, the action of the infantry is complemented by that of the tanks, which now serves as the enemy artillery furniture for close support especially towards the lower slopes of *Jebel* where the tanks have some chance motion.

Our artillery intervene with excellent results in both the barrier as the prohibition by adding their destructive effects on the equally deadly of our infantry who oppose very valid resistance. At dawn, at the cost of heavy losses the enemy is able to make only a modest penetration to the line Kef en Nsoura Djebel-el- Ksaa - hill 245. But on the afternoon of the 20th our violent counterattack supported by all our artillery throw back the enemy ensuring the balance held by the line-Nsoura Kef en el *Jebel Hajar Azreb*-hill 152.

The enemy, of course, suffers now in full our initiative and is limited in the night on the 21st - while the fighting still raging on Takrouna -this usual drumming artillery fire with exclusive appearance of repression and interdiction.

On the morning of the 22nd, the enemy, which has brought in to the line a new large unit probably of the 51st Division, resumed his attacks fiercely backed by a dreadful constant bombardment; but the infantry of the valiant "Pistoia" division make impassable barrier with their chests and how thinned the ranks do not allow the enemy to advance a step.

The "great battle" is over even on positions in *Jebel Garci*.

The British 8th Army, that General Montgomery had called in a recent proclaims "*the most powerful tool of war that the British Empire has ever owned*," is forced to mark time before overcome our infantry to realize their successes (in the words of Radio London) "*in the increasing crosses in the hills and the hospitals*."

The second half of the battle is still going on; in the field of

1st Army it is the set of partial but violent clashes that take place on the front of our division "Giovani Fascisti" where the enemy tends to take possession of our safety positions: either in the night on the 25th as the night on the 27th our groups of *Jebel Srafi* and *Jebel Therouna* are violently attacked by units from New Zealand and England, but each attack is vigorously rejected by our counterattacks.

But while these actions are in the nature of wear and noise, it is noted first and then makes sure that two of the three armored divisions of the 8th Army are transferred to the western front to reinforce the British 1st Army in Medjez Bab el Pont du Fahs.

So in the Enfidaville line, it repeated what happened to Mareth: the British 8th Army, beaten in front of the infantry battle, seeking the solution to the massed armor towards new directions, except to resume, as soon as the opportunity arises, broader initiatives in our field maximum in the coastal area where anyway seems remained the 7th Armored Division, is flowing while a new division, the 56th from Iraq.

4. -The enemy propaganda, which in the past spared the insult, from Mareth onwards seeks rather to ignore us, spreading throughout the world the belief that Italian troops are not nearly as Tunisia.

This enemy propaganda that had created his own myth in the figure of the valiant Marshal Rommel, now does not give joy to destroy it. Of course, the collapse of the myth Rommel would lack the essential grandeur if its collapsed with his famous German troops.

That's why, for the enemy, the resistance is still a wonderful exclusively German resistance, which is why the bloody counter-attacks are exclusively German counterattacks! The enemy knows that the Italian soldiers blocked the road several times, know that Rommel is absent from Tunisia (confirmed to him the prisoners), but does not renounce the myth.

The group of battles and fights faces from Mareth to date, recorded the victorious affirmation of our infantry whenever they came in contact -man against man -with the British infantry but benefited from a support means formidable. The weight of the last battle was born to an extent far greater than by our battalions in comparison to the Germanic battalions as the locations attacked by the enemy were substantially kept from us. They are authentic losses consist almost exclusively of dead and injured because the battle for Tunis had the singular aspect of a merciless fight with almost no prisoners on both sides. against 6 Italian battalions permanently eliminated from the fight and 2 withdrawn from the line Because reduced to a handful of men, the Germanic losses are around two battalions.

However, it is only right to recognize once again that the German troops have fought valiantly on this occasion.

The weight that our artillery had in past battles was very great: even if not equipped with modern guns as allied and enemy artillery, it has the advantage of possessing pioneering framework in the use of its technical means, by which he has been able to draw performance which probably no other group of executives could obtain.

The 1st Army was now the possibility of new claims for its technical content and spiritual. Hard and bloody struggles, in the tormented life of every day, his soul was refined by acquiring a sublime sensibility that is found in the eyes of our feverish wounded where we grasp the shadow of a supine resignation of those who feel the end hopeless, but rather the conscious determination of those who have understood that here we defend the homeland, our cities, home, family.

But the Army is marching rapidly towards exhaustion.

For some time our major units are replenished from time to time to better drawing upon the remains of other dissolved large units; after Mareth disbanded and incorporated into the regimental ranks also all the little independent units, but now it is full even this source to which it is drawn without reticence knowing that renewal through these remnants of proven units, undermines efficient qualitative our units because there is no doubt that the battle removes from time to time the best.

But if this can not be remedied, we will continue to fight as in the past no wonder so many of us in front of the enemy.

Z.O. April 30, 1943-XXI.

The Army Commander
GIOVANNI MESSE

COMMANDER ARMY GROUP AFRICA

on, May 6, 1943 -at 19:00

1 - The enemy armored elements with strong and overwhelming air superiority has broken through in the area south of Megerda and is located at the tip of the break through wedge to the east of Massicault.

2 - The Army Group withdraws abandoning step by step the area west of Tunis toward the fortified town of Bizerte and towards the front of the mountain south of Hamman Lif - Zaghouan-Enfidaville.

3 -Also You have:

a) The 5th Armored Army rolling back step by step with the center and the south wing and the evening of the 6th hold the line (see line 1 of the attached map 1:200,000), the evening of the 7th takes the line (see line 2 of the attached map 1:200,000) (*).

Dividing line between the "Goering" and 10th Arm. Div. see. aforementioned map.

b) The D.A.K. similarly withdraws its wing right step by step, taking the evening of the 6th the line (see. note map line-I) and the evening of the 7th line (see note map-line 2).

Line between D.A.K. and 10th Arm. Div: see. note map.

It is envisaged to put the employ of DAK, in a second time, the 10th Arm. Div and "Goering" div . The services of these divisions should be already as of now moved to the area north-east of Soliman: breakdown of the area by the Intendant of the Army Group.

c) the Italian Army must defend the current front: dividing line from DAK: (see note map).

The Italian 1st Army remains provisionally, as so far, responsible for coastal defense of the peninsula of Cape Bon.

d) anti-aircraft artillery; They are assigned to cooperation:

-the 20th A/A. Div. of the 5th Armored Army;

-the 19th A/A. Div. of the D.A.K. and to the Italian 1st Army.

The two A/A artillery groups of the 19th A/A Div. used the dependence of the 10th Arm. Div. and "Goering" div. remain temporarily employed by these divisions.

(*) The map is replaced at 200,000 from the sketch attached (*Note of the U.S.R.E*).

e) Services: the Superintendency and the Army Group ensure immediate eviction from Tunis with all the supplies in the proportions of 3/5 to the Bon Peninsula and 2/5 to in Bizerte.

The Italian 1st Army See to the immediate evacuation of all elements of the services that are located to the northwest of the new dividing line with the DAK referred to in paragraph c), in the area east of that line.

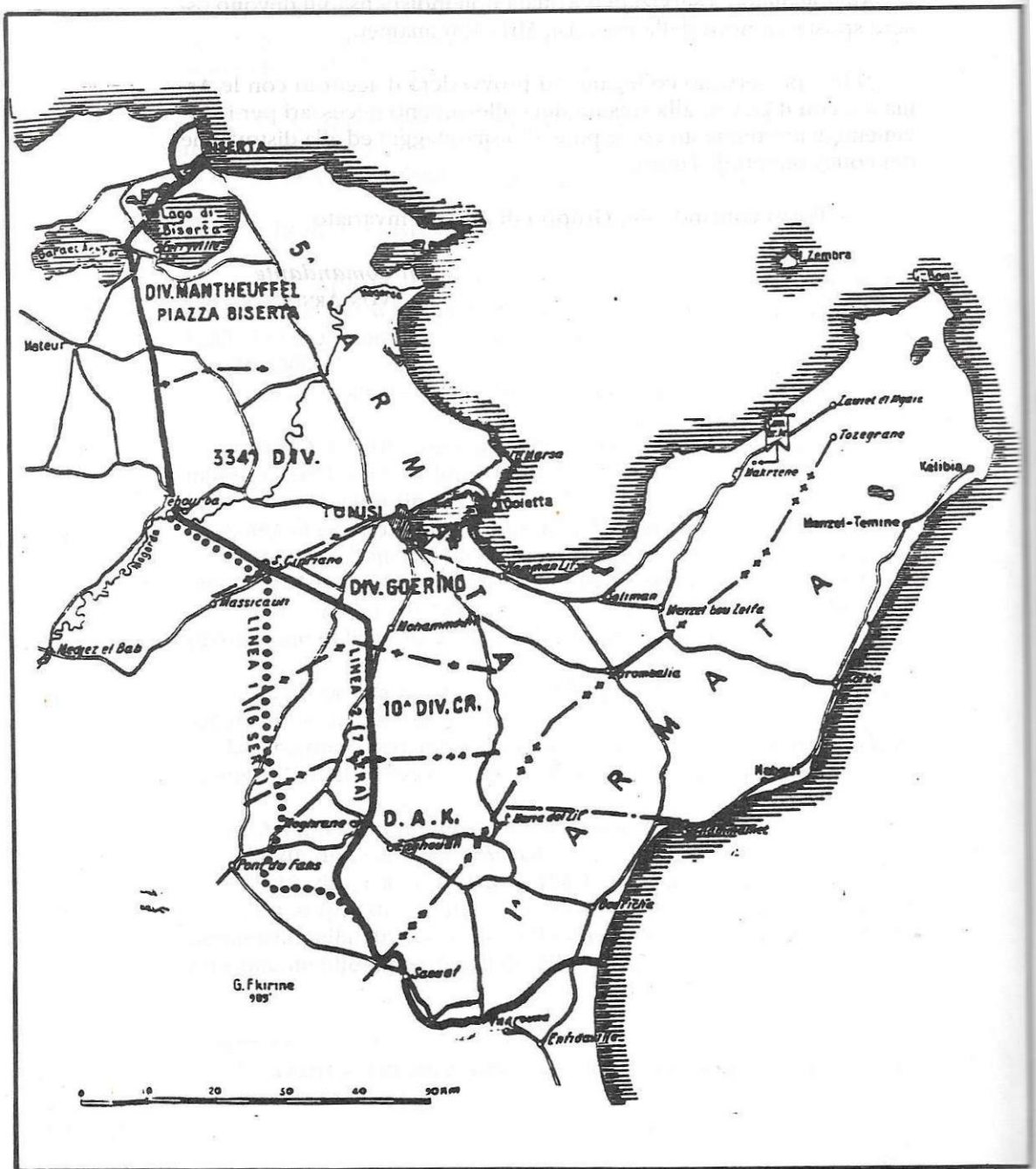
Similarly, the services of the Army is not indispensable must be moved to the north of the line Dj: Mria-Hammamet.

f) The head of connections service will agree with the Army and with the DAK the drafting of the necessary connections to the movements of withdrawal as well as the dismantling and destruction of the links of Tunis.

4 - Post of the commander of Army Group unchanged.

The commander
Von ARNIM

L'ARRETRAMENTO DELLA 5ª ARMATA TEDESCA
ordinato il 6 maggio



REPORT ON MISSION PERFORMED 12-13 May 1943
FOR DEALING WITH THE SURRENDER OF THE 1st ARMY

Now in the order of the Comando Supremo to make a truce (May 11), at 13.00 on 12 May, the Army Command sends a message to the British 8th Army Command: Referring to the long struggle gallantly fought between two armies, put evidence that the 1st Army still maintains intact its positions, Gen. Messe is prepared to negotiate the surrender with the honors of war.

At about 15:00 the answer comes from the Commander English X Corp.: the surrender must be unconditional. At this message is not given reply.

Later also the commander of the 1st Army enters English connection: asks, among other things, if you have received the message of the X Corp. he says yes, adding that it remains on the first proposal, that is, made with military honors.

At about 18:30, on the other wavelength, it is picked up another message, which remains unknown sender, who says: "Got your message. It is granted the honors of war. "

In relation to orders meanwhile arrived from the head of government, to the cessation of the fighting, it resumes the connection with the British 1st Army (after trying in vain to reach with the 8th or X Corp.). The route is shown by the British themselves: Bou-Ficha Enfidaville. Parliamentarians will be expected down the road by special agents. During the course of the Mission it will be observed a truce.

The Mission that starts at 22:00, consists of the following officials: Brigadier Mancinelli, Colonel of G.S. (Germanic) Marckert,
plus G.S. Boscardi,
plus (interpreter) De Renzi,
2 German interpreters.

And escorted by four policemen armed motorcyclists, who will stop at the first enemy lines, to await his return.

The order given by Gen. Messe is: full power to negotiate the surrender with the honors of war. If the enemy stiffens in the negative (it is unclear whether the message captured is authentic) receive the English conditions, pending for approval by the Army Commander.

At the same time the Army Commander ordered that the night are destroyed the few artillery still efficient, and now without ammunition, and all heavy weapons infantry.

Take the road Zaghouan-Bou Ficha you come to the junction

for Djeradou without meeting a soul, except for some elements of English services, parked along the road and asleep.

At the junction aforesaid stop a French armored unit that intimate halt, which is now joined.

I talk to the captain, a French colonel, from the first very polite, that tells me to be impossible to continue being the road, just beyond, stopped at a bridge over a deep *wadis*. It has no connection with the English, beyond the interruption.

The colonel then asks what are the conditions under which it intends to negotiate the surrender. It informs if the weapons were destroyed. To my blunt statement that does not mean anything if you do not communicate to the Command of the British 8th Army, which he is directed and waiting for me, Colonel changes tone, becoming decidedly hostile and arrogant, when, after his own request, refusal clearly to make a truce with the French Commander. He adds to the pressures threats: dawn will launch the attack concentric irresistible of all armored forces against the Italian 1st Army. On me will fall the responsibility of the blood shed.

I insist is left to continue towards my goal and is indeed easier to make contact with the British.

Colonel requires us to stay in the car, in which the guard has Moroccan sentries, while, he says, will try to make connection with the 8th Army Command to receive instructions about our continuation.

At 00:30 (13 May) the same colonel and reappears with the usual dismissive tone tells me to follow him to the Commander of the French Army Corp. I get in a French car, while the other members of the Mission are waiting for me in place. I am led to a farm near Ste Marie du Zid, Headquarters of the French.

I am ushered into a room, in the presence of a man in pajamas and slippers, apparently drunk (a glass of red wine on the table, sprinkled with wine and coffee confirms the impression) and still in the grip of angry excitement. He tells me to be in Gen. Lecoutex, commander of French Army Corp (*). Launching violently in my direction a chair, falling to the ground, and orders me to sit. Refusal. At his new order I oppose renewed rejection, stating that in my capacity as parliamentary, and not as a prisoner, I do not feel obliged to accept orders.

The general gives up and gives the floodgates for an endless series of poisonous insults as vulgar: Italy pulled "into the buttocks" of

(*) It's Gen. Le Couteulx, commander eponymous armored grouping. Gen. Koeltz, commander of the French 19th Corp, was not present at the negotiations (Note, office. St.).

France in 1940, but now it is he who will have the great joy to get us "in the buttocks." Over 100 pieces to his orders are already in place and at 05.00 will start the fire on the other side of the 1st Army. He already savor the joy of that concert quips on my mission of the Parliamentary: Italy has specialized in capitulations. Even in the face of Greece had to capitulate!

I take a brief moment of silence to detect how unworthy of a general insult those who is in no position to respond adequately. I insist you let me get to the Command of the 8th Army where I expected.

The general claims not to recognize me as a parliamentarian, as attaches no value to the "piece of paper" (letter identification) of which are fitted and disappearing, despite my protests, in the pocket of his pajamas. He treats me as a prisoner, although it will not be the case judging me as a spy.

Colonel intervenes saying that, contrary to the rules on sending parliamentarians, my men were armed. I say that only motorcyclists, were intended to stop at the first enemy lines, were armed so ostensible. Colonel Cavillosamente replies that we have not arrested the first lines, passing about 100 m. a tank (unmanned) which, according to him, was the first line of his armored unit.

The general returns several times on the invitation to negotiate the surrender with him. Refusal still significantly; the 1st Army has so far been engaged in fighting only with the British 8th Army, with which he began negotiations of surrender which now must be concluded, in the common interest. Certainly in vain to explain how groundless the statement often repeated by our own preconceived desire to "ignore" the French army, while we stand to go in its area of action. As a parliamentarian I have to believe that we can count on all the enemies Commands you encounter on my path, be they British, French or American, to promptly fulfill my mission. I come instead detained, insulted and threatened: the heavy responsibility of this falls entirely on the French Command.

More and more excited, the general is gone at last, shouting new threats, leaving me alone in the room, watched by four watchmen Senegalese.

I remain so until about 04:00, when determining a total change of scene. The general returns, this time in uniform and not more altered. Accompanies the Gen. Boisson, commander of a French armored division, which has undergone an attitude towards me very correct.

Gen. Lecouteux tells me in a tone that would be courteous to personally accompany me to the Command of the 8th Army, with whom he came into connection (and which, I believe, has reprimanded the unfortunate initiative of having withheld). Pending the cars sit and offering me a chair. Decline the offer. It offers me a cigarette.

Thank you, refusing. He tells me that Italy is over because after this defeat will no longer rise. I replied stating my wonder at this statement by just a French general who certainly knows, or at least believe, that no defeat can be considered definitive. We continue that we Italians have made a serious mistake to put with the Germans in the same way as, perhaps, has made a serious mistake to put France with the British. All Latin, French, Italian, Spanish, should unite to face the Germans of all kinds, including the Anglo-Saxons. I mention that my recent resumption of contact with the Latin Frenchman suggested to me very promising forecasts for intimate relationships.

It starts. General Lecouteux and General Boisson from now personally lead the expedition, and will work in every way for us to reach our goal without delay. I believe that, as before the fundamental motive of the French attitude is to be found in the effort to ensure the French arms the honor of the capture of the 1st Army, blowing it under the nose of the British (and the hope of securing a rich booty), so now We want to be present at all costs in negotiations to procure at least a good commission on prey.

You reach the junction of Djeradou, where I left the companions of Mission who are still waiting in cars. At about 06:00, after it was recognized a route that allows you to bypass the interruption through the *wadis*, continue to Bou Fichta and then to Enfidavillas.

Just north of our line, held a few hours before the 90th German division, we stop near a English Command (I think a commander of the 1st Army Division). It is, apparently, to ask for clarification about our continued, especially with regard to transitability of the way through our former lines.

While you wait you approach a British lieutenant colonel, I think of the I.S. along with Gen. Lecouteux who spoke to him. Speaks French and German. I contain he is marked by venomous irony, insulting and provocative.

He affirms that it is useless to speak of surrender of the 1st Army as the 1st Army no longer exists: you have already surrendered en masse the German 90th and "*Superga*" (evidently believes that the "*Superga*" was part of the 1st Army). The other few divisions have practically disappeared from the battlefield. He asks me, of course without success, that force has our Army. Mocks the Italian commander of the 1st Army: who is "this" Giovanni Messe? Who knows? What do you want? He also tries, in passing, to steal from the 8th Army our surrender, in favor of the 1st Army, which we already there on hand.

Then it turns to Col. Markert, inviting him to urge surrender

German troops of the Army, following the example of the 90th Division and Gen. von Arnim. Ostentatiously, for a couple of times, it appears not to want to take over my work in conversation with the German colonel. I order then to these, in my capacity as head of the mission, however, to refrain from responding officer English until they deem not to talk directly with me. Correctly Col. Marckert adheres to my order.

The French General and the English officer are show of regret for the delay interposed by our presence to attack General prepared. In fact known that a large armored unit English (probably a Tank Regiment) parked not far from us in no way looks to be on the verge of moving to the attack: men just beginning to wake up and wait quietly to ordinary operations cleaning staff and the breakfast. Gen. Boisson is a way to approach and make sure, however, until our mission is not returned, there will be nothing.

At about 08:00 the way you shoot. We cross our lines yesterday, where were organized passages in minefields, and a bridge was thrown on a road interruption. You reach the Command of the English 56th Division, just north of Enfidaville. Here finally the welcome and the stretch by all are marked by courtesy and respect.

The French generals come back: apparently they were told that their presence is useless.

The commander of the 56th tells me that is committed to accompany me to the command of the X Corp, where, for the await the commander of the 8th Army, will be treated the yield. He invites me to get into his car, making the seat to his right. On the way it is talking politely, but did not touch the topic of the mission. The other members of the Mission followed, on our cars. At about 08:30 you reach the headquarters of the X Corps. near Bou Ali, about thirty kilometers. south of Enfidaville.

The commander Gen. Freyberg (that following the cession of the 8th Army G.U. made in favor of other sectors recently commanded a stretch in front of roughly corresponding to the entire 1st Army) we get outdoors, surrounded by all his staff. The land reserved for parliamentarians is about one meter lower than that chosen by the winners.

Decline my name and the mandate received from the Marshal Messe commander of the 1st Army, to treat that is made with the honors of war.

General Freyberg responds categorically that the surrender must be unconditional or rather, must be carried out under the conditions that he has already given me and that are delivered in Italian text (see Annex).

I ask then if the message received by our radio at 19:00 the previous day, when it was granted the honor of the request

weapons, was recognized from Gen. Freyberg. I answer that it ignores the existence and that in any case can only be apocryphal. It is confirmed that the surrender must take place under the conditions specified, pointing out that at 12:30 the commander of the 1st Army will participate if is willing to accept it. Otherwise they will resume fighting.

I note that the request goes beyond the limits of my mandate, and therefore shall return immediately to my Command to the decisions of the Marshal Messe. I ask only to be able to immediately discuss on one point: both avoided that still drives the Italian-German troops should surrender to color, although these are currently facing their respective sectors. General Freyberg responds laconically, pointing to the clock face: there is not a moment to lose in the discussions, which in any case would be useless, if we want to get to the command within the time limits established. This dismisses the Mission.

Apart, then, the Gen. Freyberg expresses Maj. De Renzi and then to me personally his regret for not "being able to" grant the 1st Army, as was his wish, the honors of war. He asks me to repeat these statements to his Marshal Messe, which will be happy to personally demonstrate their deference, when the Marshal will present to control the X Corps.

It starts immediately, accompanied by an armored car and a passenger car equipped with English radio. Also on each of our cars with a British officer. facilitate us for the return trip. It recalls quickly the path already traveled. At the junction of Djeradou, where they remained waiting for the police escort, General Boisson, which is in place, holds the promise made to me a few hours before releasing them into the wild.

Unaware of the events that had meanwhile led the Commander of the 1st Army to order the surrender since the 09:30, we began to see columns of our prisoners, framed by Moroccan *goumiers*. I have the impression that, by breaking the truce, during my absence took place an attack that since we are now almost unarmed, has determined the collapse of the defense. Helped by British officers who accompany us speed up to the maximum operation to prevent the Army Commander is captured, before our arrival, by French troops of color.

So I reach the command post at 12:20 and refer to Commander the outcome of my mission, coming to my turn informed on the development of events during the morning.

At 12:30 it is transmitted to Gen. Freyberg confirming surrender of the 1st Army and the acceptance of the conditions, as they are still valid, after orders had been issued earlier and no longer able to be countermanded.

At the same time the commander of the 1st Army remained prisoner

Commander English X Corps., represented by the officers who had escorted us on the way back.

No. 4. P.O.W. Camp 30 V. 1943.

Gen. MANCINELLI

Appendix

CONDITIONS OF YIELD GIVEN BY THE 8th ARMY
TO THE COMMANDER ITALIAN 1st ARMY

1 - Order troops to lay down their arms and to surrender immediately to the nearest troops.

2 - Do not destroy armaments and equipment.

3 - Provide all plans of the minefields that are in the area, delivering them to the nearest allied troops.

Hostilities will cease when they were carried out these measures, the implementation of which must be immediate. The Commander of the 1st Army will communicate what time his forces will surrender.

COMMANDER 1st ARMY
Operations Office

No. 3976 / Op. Prot.

P.M. 11, on May 5, 1943.

Subject: Behavior of Italian troops.

*To Mr. General of the Army von Arnim
Commander Army Group Africa.*

Surprised by the severe judgment expressed in Tagesmeldungen Command Army Group n. 2472 and no. 6738 of May against two regiments of Italian Bersaglieri operating in the 5th Army, I wanted to ascertain the exact truth of the facts, as was my duty as commander of all Italian troops in Africa and jealous guardian, at the same time, the honor and prestige of the Italian arms down here that will force their lavish, in generous race with Germans fighters, to achieve of the hard objective assigned to our common action.

It must first be said that "two regiments Bersaglieri" are designated in fact the remains, numerically very short, of those who were two brave regiments, they tried and thinned by countless battles.

5th Bersaglieri, back by the heroic resistance of el Guettar-O. Halfaya with the "Centauro" Division had in fact a total, arriving in the coastal sector on April 26, no more than 500 men (including services), in 5 lean companies, with two battalion commands.

10th Bersaglieri, following numerous battles sustained in the same coastal area, had on April 23 about 800 men (including services), uniting in a battalion formation.

Only in consideration of the importance of values in the entity of regimental traditions materialized I had waived to dissolve such residues to merge them into other units that also need supplements.

The investigation that I did take place, and the elements of which have been largely provided or confirmed by the German local commanders, the facts cited in the bulletins on May 1st, which gave rise to the following reports of the command Army Group:

"... The enemy was able to break through without the two regiments of Bersaglieri used there, it is so far, oppose considerable resistance."

"... Situation in the coastal strip still not perfectly clear, following the failure of full bersaglieri regiments used there"

are shown in detail in the attached chronological Annex.

It is not my intention, it would be possible to me, get in the examination of the details up to the behavior of individuals. Objective examination of the facts shows, however, in my view, that both Bersaglieri regiments, which collectively is facing the most serious indictment of the bulletin, they fought bravely facing up to the extreme of their scarce forces the burden of a fight and trying inadequate maneuver to not get involved in the retrograde movement that the development of the struggle had imposed on neighboring German units.

Own statements of the commander of the area, Lt. Col. Hering, who was the first report about an alleged lack of resistance of some elements of Bersaglieri (not therefore the two Bersaglieri regiments) had received two German officers connection. This recommendation has been repeated by him certainly to the Comando Superiore and is gradually rising to the command of the Army Group, increasing bitterness, as I understand it, in subsequent reports. Ultimately, the very serious statement in the bulletin Army Group, damaging military honor two Italian regiments, reflects, without any confirmation and without any control, the impression of a modest official lower connection, probably complement, probably influenced by exciting environment of the battlefield.

I think I have objectively demonstrated the inexactitude of expressed against the two regiments of Bersaglieri.

I would consider it, however, to neglect the duty of the unlimited collaboration to which I feel passionately attached in the interests of the Great Common Cause if I did not add the expression of my firm belief that in any case, except the same truth of the facts, similar events can only harm the daily and grand opera in true brotherhood of arms held our troops.

While the relentless punishment of the guilty and the weak is the most effective outward expressions of the government of men, the collective condemnation involving the good is often the cause of resentment and, ultimately, depression.

This axiomatic truth is indeed surely and deeply convinced that Your Excellency, I am sure, would abstain in daily bulletins from any mention of any negative performance of individual German units even if he had actually occurred (that in the great community of more armed is inevitable) and even if some indication in this sense had been collected from the interception of enemy radio communications.

The more delicate, it is necessary to recognize it without reticence, is the issue in the case of mixed arms because the word of the foreign higher could cause severe, even if absolutely right, a human resentment of offended national pride and thus a negative reaction.

At this criterion I have adhered inside of the army, appreciating the magnificent overall contribution of brave German troops that I am honored to lead, but neglecting to pursue and to report sporadic minor performance of which, I am sure, there is no shortage of deal makers superiors.

A final aspect of the question I finally have to illuminate.

In the specific case from which this takes time, signaling the Army Group was based on the assertion of a liaison officer to the Italian battalions. More than once I have had occasion to observe that events interesting Italian troops were exposed in the Army Group bulletin in a more or less divergent from that transmitted from my control, drawing the impression that the compiler respect, perhaps exclusively, to I scored direct actions from German sources.

In the conscious responsibility of Army Commander are guarantor of objectivity and accuracy of my communications, while not as much objectivity and accuracy can be expected by ranking officers modest and limited viewing angle.

The work of liaison officers is precious and rightly appreciated the level of cooperation. It would become difficult and could also at some point be infeasible if you were grounds for suspicion that such officials are monitoring bodies, instead of collaboration.

The serious now that we live with equal passion led me to expose you with absolute sincerity and frankness my thoughts on some sensitive issues.

I am sure, Mr. Generally, you will want to consider this, an effective contribution to an ever more effective collaboration.

General of the Army Commander
GIOVANNI MESSE

Attached to the sheet 3976 Op. Of 5 May 1943.

SUMMARY CHRONOLOGICY OF EVENTS INTERESTING
THE 5th AND 10th REGT. BERSAGLIERI FROM 23 TO 30 April 1943

23/24-IV. -10th Bersaglieri deployed in the sector O. el Heaka hill 107 (not included) to the sea. Portion 107 is left by the neighboring German unit. The Italian battalion remains in place, constituting a defensive flank to hill 212.

25/28-IV. -In Order following Manteuffel division the 10th Bersaglieri is deployed by hill 212 to the sea. Attacked resists in place while on the left the German Helfrich battalion evacuate hill 401. The division Command order in the night on 27 withdraw hill 397 (excluded) -Kef Touro-Dj. Touro-hill 372 (not included): given the difficulties of the land thickly covered with shrubs, they are lost in the fold some heavy weapons. The combat effectiveness of the rest of this regiment it is significantly further decreased.

30-IV. -5th And 10th Bersaglieri are deployed on the line hill 372 (not included). Dj. Touro-Kef Kef Touro-hill 397-en-Nsoura coast. 5th Bersaglieri had been removed from the anti-tank co. used with German units. Commander of 10th Bersaglieri, found that hill 372 contrast to the expected had not been occupied by the Germans, he provides to occupy it with his strength, feeling his sector commander, Lt. Col. Hering. From 09:00 to 18:00 the battalion of 10th Bersaglieri fighting fiercely against overwhelming enemy forces between hill 372 and the track- hill 314- hill 260. At 18:00 the battalion is overwhelmed.

At the same time the 5th Bersaglieri is forced to fall back on his left hill 376, to parry to circumvention, and is attacked in turn by major American forces destroy a co. a &. 360 of Kef en Nsoura. Then organizes a defense to hill 416 and only barely manages to remove the company's headquarters, hill 282, to complete avoidance.

In the evening of the 30th the fighting force of two regiments
it's the following:

5th Regiment:

1 company riflemen,

1 anti-tank company (in another area);

10th Regiment:

1 company riflemen.

With these forces can no longer oppose the pass attacker.

Appendix no. 47

Berlin, on May 18, 1943 -XXI

Nr. 798/S

Subject: The German press and the fall of Tunisia.

THE COMANDO SUPREMO (3 copies)
Military Post Nr. 21

TO SUPERESERCITO (1 copy)
Military Post Nr. 9

German press have appeared numerous articles and correspondence in which he describes the development of recent fighting in Tunisia, highlighting the value of the German soldier. These items tend to clearly explain to the public the rapid collapse of a resistance which, unwisely, the German propaganda had almost the eve presented with the chance of a long life.

Printing evidently obeys the directives received from above, but it should be noted how it makes few references to the presence or the strength of the Italian troops, even if in some cases do not tend to attribute to them the cause of the failure.

This deplorable attitude is perfectly conforms to that by which the German Ministry of Propaganda has mutilated the release of the Italian Headquarters on May 13 by removing the most significant parts with which the Army claimed the honor of having fought for last, between the troops of the Axis, the extreme edge of the Tunisian territory and with whom they paid tribute to the value of our commanders and our troops.

Typical in this regard are the matches on the battle in Tunisia published in "Voelkischer Beobachter", the official newspaper of the National Socialist Party, which has the highest circulation in Germany. Author of these correspondences is the journalist von Esebeck; matches themselves have appeared in the numbers of 16 and 17 current.

In the preamble to the Esebeck first article states that in March 1941 a German armored division, reinforced by some Italian units, kicking the opponent from Tripoli. In the second article, passing to the description of the last battle, the Esebeck, while holding in general terms regarding the level and the action of the departments Germanic, is saying that the area between the valley and the Segenan Coast was essentially entrusted to a Bersaglieri regiment; that to Americans and Gaullists managed to infiltrate the Italian positions and afterwards to overwhelm by surprise, causing a leak

and thus threatening flank the German defenses south of Segenan. The German High Command was therefore forced to withdraw troops from across the sector and clear Mateur.

After speaking of the use of the Germanic 15th Armored Division (General Borowietz) against the attack on mass held by the British with 1,200 tanks, the correspondent noted that on May 9 the southern front remained intact, without mentioning that it was required by the Italian 1st Army.

In the close correspondence Eisebeck reads: "for two years, the German soldier has constrained the African theater of war the concentrated forces of the British Empire and, when they were added to the American ally, has stood up for six months impetus of the British and American armies." No mention of the Italians.

This form of propaganda does not remain without effect on the German masses, in which go spreading the opinion that the loss of Tunisia is essentially attributable to the Italian troops, whose presence in Africa want to ignore when it comes to ascertain the long tenacious resistance for almost three years to the British forces, reinforced later by the American ones; the presence of Italian troops are taken into account only when they want to subtly allocating losses of Tunisia.

Some reports came from our units and various elements located in Germany confirms the spread in the German population of these erroneous opinions.

The General Chief of Mission
(E.L. MARRAS)

Appendix no. 48

Berlin, on May 21, 1943 XXI

Nr. 1214 / Ord.

Subject: Comments by the German press on the importance of the African front.

THE COMANDO SUPREMO (2 copies)
Military Post Nr. 21
TO SUPERESERCITO (S.I.E.) (2 copies)
Military Post Nr. 9

As an index of the point of view of the German leaders about the importance that represented for Germany the African theater of war, I report the following statements in a recent article in the "Volkischer Beobachter", while noting that they are now in part dictated by obvious propaganda purposes.

Must realize the fact, the newspaper said, that *Africa has always been a secondary theater of operations*. It may seem tempting to search the map of the world a few points that are the nerve centers of the British Empire, to deduce that England can definitely be affected in those points. *But Germany's leaders have always considered at the forefront of their means and objectives. Hitler's Germany has never had the intention of conducting a second world war.*

Its political demands were limited from the beginning to the achievement of freedom of movement in their own living space. If, following the instigations Jewish war against the will of Germany, has again become a world war, the continent of Europe, however, remains the space assigned to it by fate. The threat against the existence of the Reich represented by the energies of hell of Bolshevism has determined that *for Germany the front for excellence is Eastern.*

The supreme law of the conduct of the war therefore requires bringing together on that front all his available forces. *Africa was not to be and has become a second front.*

Moreover, examining the possibilities for further development of military operations on the southern front in Europe, the newspaper wrote that the Anglo-Americans should not overestimate their success too, because their task war is only beginning. *The actions in North Africa have had only a preparatory*

more extensive operations to be carried out against the European continent.

The difficulties of sending reinforcements and supplies in Africa, who have so much hampered the operations of the Axis, now constitute a disadvantage for the Anglo-Americans, who will realize what it means having to hold a beachhead overseas. An attempted invasion of the continent will force the opponent to commit its entire fleet, and to focus its efforts on a single point. Every action in style will put the British and Americans before problems whose solution does not possess the necessary elements.

The General Chief of Mission
(E.L. Marras)

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Il maresciallo Ugo Cavallero.



Il generale Ettore Bastico.



Il feldmaresciallo Alberto Kesselring.



Il feldmaresciallo Erwin Erzin Rommel.

Top Left: Marshal Ugo Cavallero
Bottom Left: Field Marshal Albert Kesselring
Rommel

Top Right: Gen. Ettore Bastico
Bottom Right: Field Marshal Erwin



Il generale Bernard L. Montgomery.



Il generale Harold Alexander.



L'ammiraglio Andrew B. Cunningham.

Top Left: Gen. Bernard Montgomery Top Right: Gen. Harold Alexander
Bottom: Adm. Andrew B. Cunningham



*Gennaio 1943.
Il generale Sogno in visita al Bey di Tunisi.*



*Gennaio 1943
Il Centro della guardia al palazzo da Bey di Tunisi.*

Top: Gen. Sogono visiting the Bey of Tunisi
Bottom: January 1943; The Station of the Palace Guard of the Bey of Tunisi



I primi protagonisti americani.

Da sinistra, il gen. Oliver, il gen. Rooks, il gen. Fredendall, il gen. Clark ed il gen. Doolittle.

The main American protagonists

From the Left, Gen. Oliver, Gen. Rooks, Gen. Fredendall, Gen. Clark & Gen. Doolittle.



Il generale Vittorio Amborsio.



Il generale Giovanni Messa.



Il generale Giuseppe De Stefanis.



Il generale Paolo Berardi.

Top Left: Gen. Vittorio Amborsio
Bottom Left: Gen. Giuseppe De Stefanis

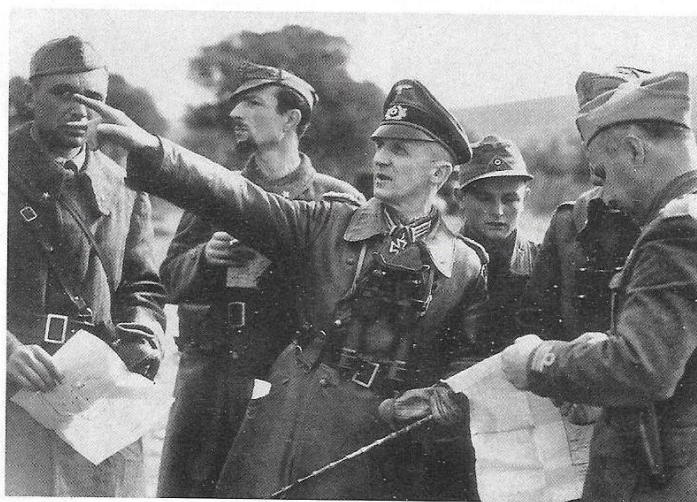
Top Right: Gen. Giovanni Messa
Bottom Right: Gen. Paolo Berardi



Il generale Walther Nehring.



Il colonnello-generale Jürgen von Arnim.

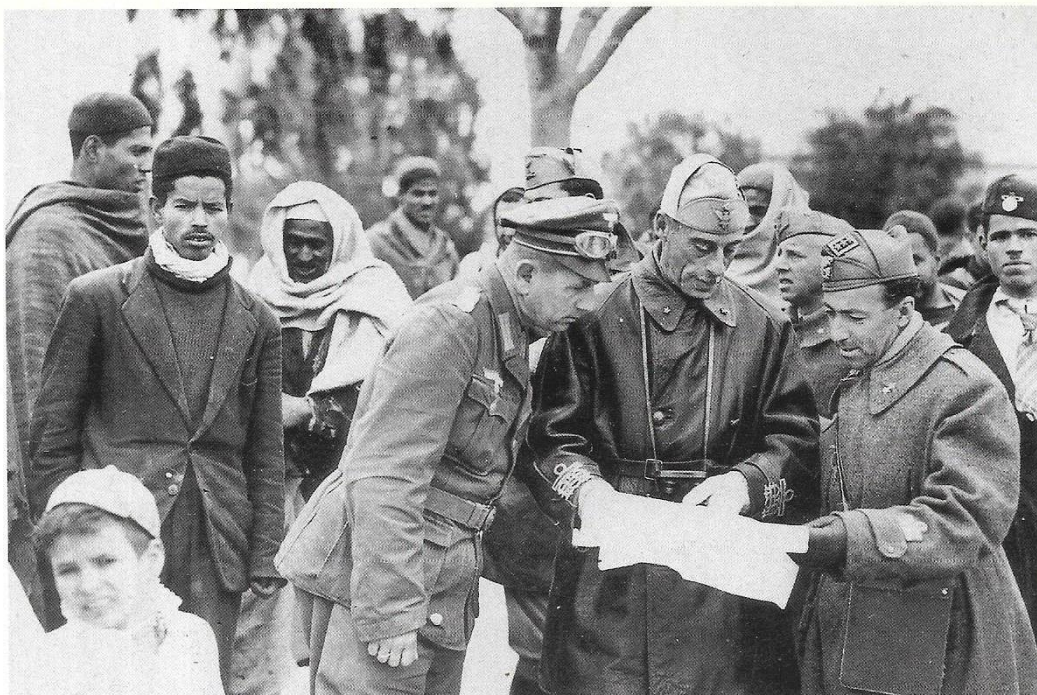


Il colonnello von Manteuffel.

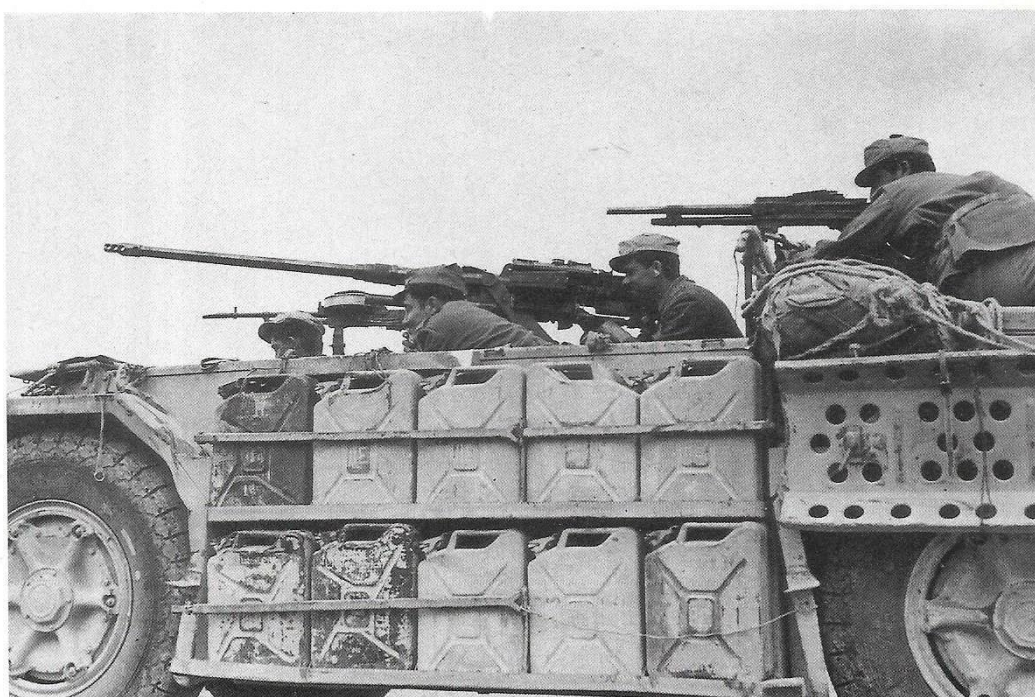
Top Left: Gen. Walther Nehring

Top Right: Col. Gen. Jürgen von Arnim

Bottom: Col. von Manteuffel



*Febbraio 1943.
Il Gen. Calvi di Berigolo dopo l'occupazione di Gafsa.*



Una pattuglia motorizzata sabariana.

Top: Gen. Calvi di Berigolo after the occupation of Gafsa.
Bottom: A Saharan motorized patrol



I generali Kenneth Anderson e Omar Bradley.



*6 gennaio 1943.
Biserta dopo un bombardamento.*

Top: Generals Kenneth Anderson & Omar Bradley
Bottom: 6 January 1943; Biserta after a bombing



Marzo, 1943.

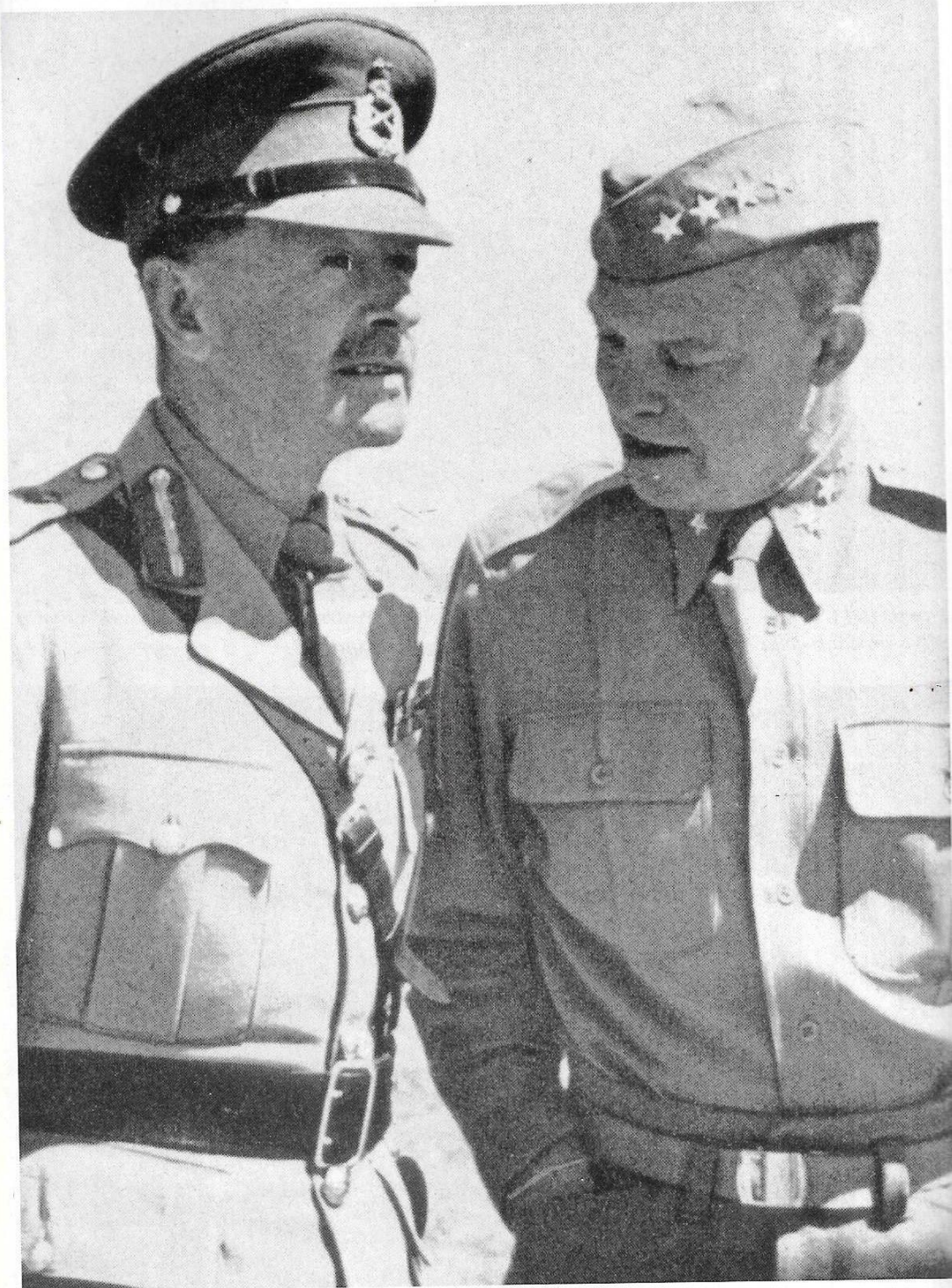
All'osservatore della 1ª armata italiana sulle posizioni di Mareth.



Sousse - marzo 1943.

Controllo del traffico.

Top: March 1943; The observers of the Italian 1st Army on the positions of Mareth
Bottom; Sousse – March 1943. Traffic control



I generali Alexander e Eisenhower.

Generals Alexander & Eisenhower



16 marzo.

I generali Patton ed Eisenhower a colloquio all'inizio dell'offensiva del II corpo americano.

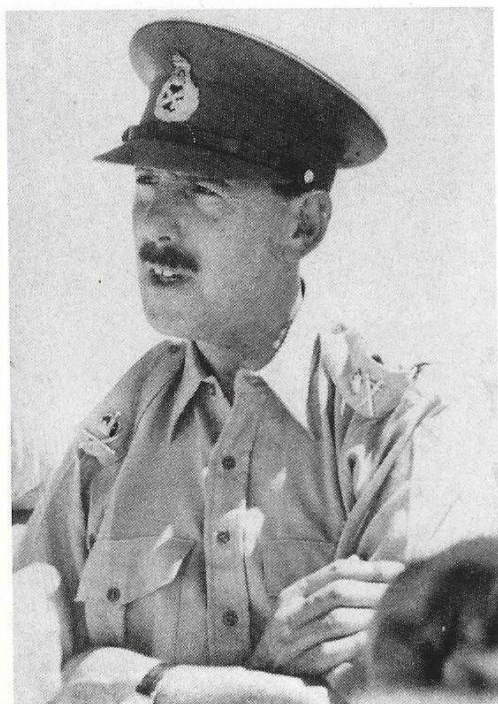
16 March. General Patton & Eisenhower a meeting at the start of the American II Corp's Offensive.



Il generale Alphonse Juin.



Il generale Omar Bradley.



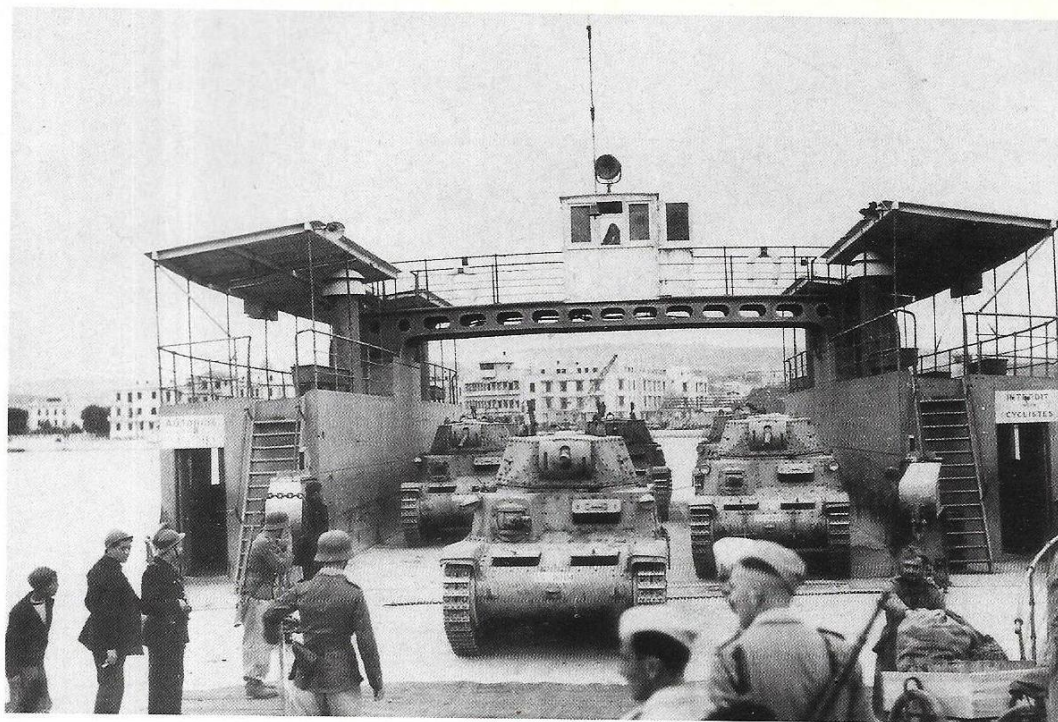
Il generale Oliver Leese.



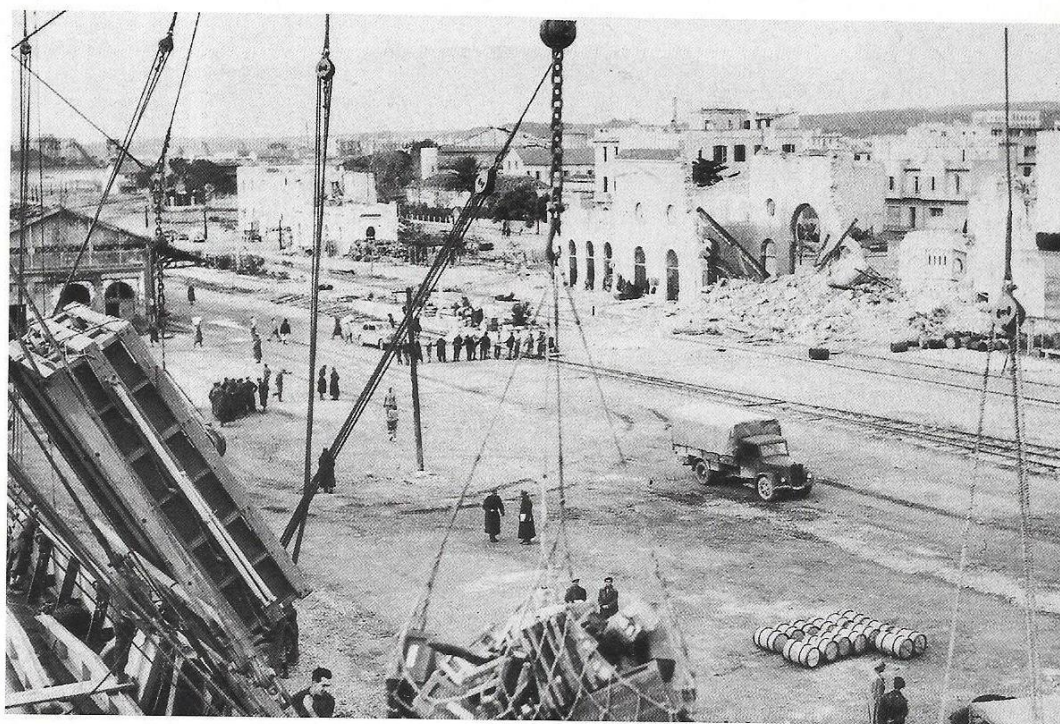
Il generale Brian G. Horrocks.

Top Left: Gen. Alphonse
Bottom Left: Gen. Oliver Leese

Top Right: Gen. Omar Bradley
Bottom Right: Gen. Brian G. Horrocks



*Biserta - marzo 1943.
Lo sbarco di carri armati.*



*Biserta - 1943.
Lo scarico del materiale da un convoglio.*

Top: Biserta – March 1943; landing of Tanks
Bottom: Biserta – 1943; Landing of materials of the cargo ship



*Aprile 43.
Lavori difensivi ad Enfidaville.*



*Aprile 1943.
Lavori difensivi a Enfidaville.*

Top: April '43; Defensive works at Enfidaville.
Bottom: April 1943; Defensive works at Enfidaville

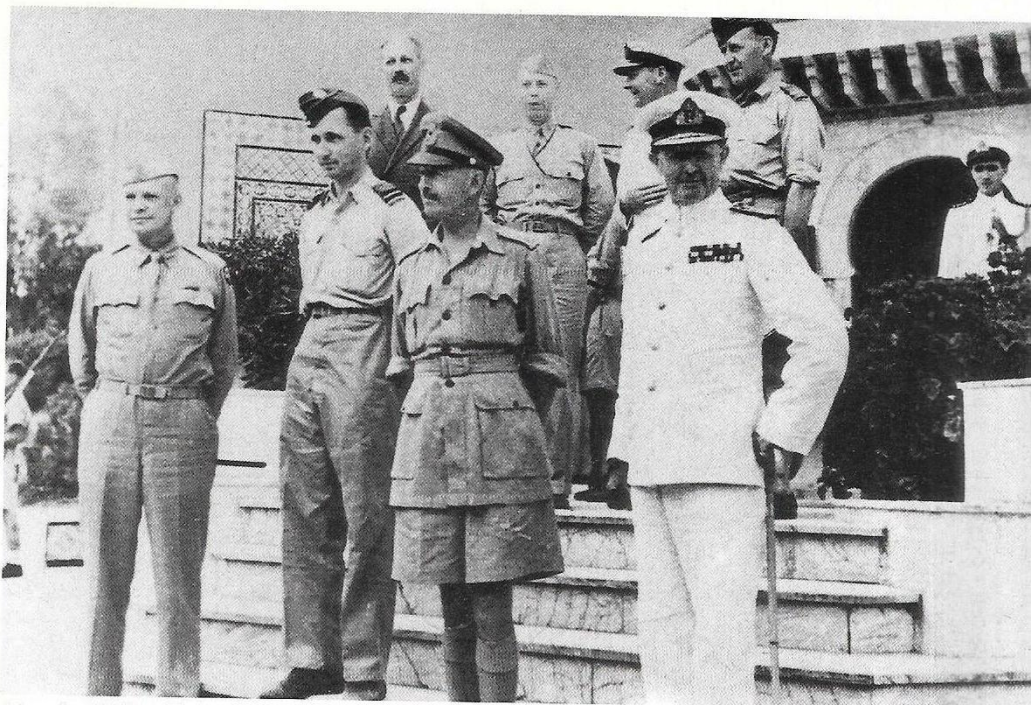


*Marzo 1943.
Il gen. Messe ed il gen. Mancinelli.*



*All'osservatorio della 1ª armata italiana.
Il gen. Messe ed il gen. Mancinelli.*

Top: March 1943; General Messe & Gen. Mancinelli
Bottom: The observers of the Italian 1st Army; Gen. Messe & Gen. Mancinelli



Maggio 1943 a Tunisi.

I comandanti alleati. In prima fila da sinistra, gen. Eisenhower, mar. capo dell'Aria Tedder, gen. Alexander, aimm. Andrew B. Cunningham.



La resa della 1ª armata.

Il gen. Messe al posto comando del gen. Montgomery.

Top: May 1943 in Tunis; The Allied commanders;
First row from the left; Gen Eisenhower, Air Marshal Tedder, Gen. Alexander, Adm. Cunningham
The yielding of the 1st Army. Gen. Messe at the command post of Gen. Montgomery